

Halo: The Installation

by Sanokal

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Summary: The Covenant controls Earth, the Flood is unleashed and the fate of the galaxy hangs in the balance. An ancient secret, buried under the sands of Africa for millenia may hold the key to humanity's salvation or doom. The Master Chief, and his new ally, the Arbiter, must uncover that secret and stop the forces that threaten the galaxy once and for all. A Halo 3 novelisation.

1. Arrival

****Halo 3: The Installation.****

****Hello, all. Sanokal here. ****

****To any one new, hello! It's my first Halo fanfiction, so I decide to do a Halo 3 novelization. Why? Well, Halo 4 is out now, and it looks amazing so far. So, I wanted to commemorate its arrival with a recap of the events that led up to it. The reason that I didn't do a Halo: CE was because it's already been officially done, and the reason that I didn't do a Halo 2 one, is because Peptuck started one, and even though it looks like it'll never be finished, I don't want to try to compare myself to the guy " he's on a whole other level to me. I've followed the naming convention used by Dietz for The Flood, and followed by Peptuck for The Arbiter, and named mine The Installation (the Ark would have been far more appropriate, but it's taken by someone else who at least started a pretty good attempt.) Oh, and I also actually have this game, thanks to my awesome best mate, who got it for me for my nineteenth birthday this year.****

****So, without further ado, here we go.****

****Creative credit goes to Bungie. The transcript source goes to Halo Nation. Two collections of bosses.****

Arrival.

It was a clear night sky: several bright pinpoints of white light, the stars of the galaxy, were hanging in the center of the endless night sky of Planet Earth. The Tanzanian landscape of Africa had changed since the 21st century; it now bore a tranquil forest, with lush greenery and a winding river.

A cool female voice whispered in the night. _"They let me pick. Did I ever tell you that? Choose whichever Spartan I wanted."_

A brighter pinpoint of light appeared in the night sky " but this was no star.

_"You know me. I did my research. Watched as you became the soldier we needed you to be." _

Something came into view, entering the atmosphere, trailing flames that were splitting the night sky.

_"Like the others, you were strong and swift and brave. A natural leader." _

The fireball was coming nearer, and began to break up a little.

_"But you had something they didn't. Something no one saw, but me." _

A second, lesser fireball broke off from the main one. It moved at an oblique angle to the first, coming closer while the first vanished behind a spray of trees.

_"Can you guess?" _

The object moved even nearer, and its trajectory began to curve.

_"Luck." _

The fireball smashed into the ground with an earth-shattering impact. The jungle had been quiet and peaceful, and now, it was full of light and sound.

_"Was I wrong?" _asked the voice of Cortana.

In the same forest it was now early morning, with the sun streaming through the trees onto the smoking ruin where the object had hit the ground. In the foreground, an armored gauntlet was visible, while in the background, several Marines moved around; the First Squad. The one in the back wore a Sergeant's cap. The Marines of First Squad were anxiously observing the armored gauntlet. A dread silence permeated the jungle.

"This ain't good," remarked one of the Marines.

"Damn," replied a second. "How far did he fall?"

"Two kilometers, easy," said a third, as the Sergeant in the hat, a tall black man, turned around and took a long drag on his Sweet Williams cigar, before blowing out smoke. It was none other than

Sergeant Major Avery J. Johnson, one of the few survivors of the Halo disaster, and again of the skirmish on Delta Halo.

"Stay sharp!" warned Johnson shortly.

The Marines moved closer to the owner of the gauntlet, while one aimed his assault rifle to the left then to the right of the clearing looking for any sign of the enemy.

The owner of the gauntlet was a massive man encased in green armor, lying at one end of his own personal crater, the result of falling about two kilometers. Despite the motionlessness of the man inside, the armor was neither scratched nor singed, apart from a large scrape across the upper right of the chestplate. The man lay in an odd position, like a dropped statue; hands raised awkwardly.

The Spartan was still and silent. The Marines moved closer to the Spartan, taking up combat positions. One sat down beside him and took out a small computer.

"Corpsman?" asked Johnson, worry evident on his tired face.

"His armor's locked up," replied the Navy corpsman doubtfully. "Gel layer could have taken most of the impact..."

He tapped something in on the computer. With a hiss, the Spartan's outstretched arms collapsed onto his chest. The Marine checked for vital signs. No readings.

"I don't know, Sergeant Major," he finally replied.

Johnson knelt by the side of his fallen friend and placed a hand on his chestplate, feeling for breath, or any sign that the man was alive "if he could find it under all that armor. He inadvertently breathed smoke into the man's face. After a few seconds, he sighed sadly, reached behind the man's head and pulled a rectangular chip out of his helmet, noting the lack of code flowing across it in surprise.

"Radio for VTOL, heavy lift gear," said Johnson, studying the chip. "We're not leaving him here."

An armored hand reached up and grabbed his wrist. It was the armored man's.

"Yeah," replied the Spartan known as the Master Chief. "You're not."

He pushed himself slowly to his feet, Johnson lending him an unnecessary hand.

Johnson gave a sigh of relief. "Crazy fool!" he muttered gruffly, shaking his head. "Why do you always jump? One of these days, you're gonna land on somethin' as stubborn as you are! And I don't do bits and pieces!" he added pointing at the scrape across the Chief's chest.

The Chief said nothing. Instead, he reached down and took the chip from the Sergeant's hand before letting go of his arm.

"Where is she, Chief?" asked Johnson. "Where's Cortana?"

The Chief stared at the data crystal of the chip, and for a second, Cortana's face flashed across the screen, along with an echo from her words at High Charity, the planetoid city of the Covenant that he'd left Cortana on.

"Don't make a girl a promise... If you know you can't keep it," she'd said.

Johnson gave him a confused look.

Finally, the Chief responded. "She stayed behind."

The Chief inserted the chip into the port at the back of his helmet.

Johnson turned to the corporal. "Corpsman? Make it quick."

"Sorry, sir," replied the corpsman carefully. When you were dealing with Avery J. Johnson, you had to be careful. He turned to the Master Chief. "Your armor's still in partial lockdown," he explained.

The Master Chief nodded. This would be tiresome, but he knew it was necessary.

The corpsman showed him a screen with a red light. "Look up here, sir," he said.

The screen went green when the Master Chief looked at it.

"Okay. Now down here," continued the corpsman.

The Chief looked down, and the screen responded again.

"Good," replied the corpsman. He turned to Johnson. "Everything checks out, Sergeant Major."

"Kick off the training wheels, corpsman," said Johnson. "He's good to go."

The Chief looked around, taking in his surroundings. Then he bristled â€" somewhere near him was a familiar sight... the heat-wave effect of Covenant active camouflage!

He didn't see Johnson give it a nod. As the Elite decloaked, the Master Chief moved with fluid grace, brushing aside Johnson and another Marine next to the Elite, the Arbiter that he'd met in the catacombs of Delta Halo, and he drew Johnson's magnum pistol from its holster.

"Chief, wait!" protested Johnson sharply, as the Master Chief jammed the pistol between the Arbiter's mandibles. "The Arbiter's with us!"

The armored Elite, a large reptilian alien with a saurian neck and head, his lower jaw composed of four mandibles, glared at the Master Chief, but showed no sign of discomfort, nor did he make any move to point the gun away from himself.

"Come on now," said Johnson.

The Chief hesitated to lower the pistol.

Johnson grabbed the Chief's shoulder. "We got enough to worry about without you two tryin' to kill each other!" he snapped.

The Spartan looked the Elite in the eye, before slowly lowering his gun.

The Arbiter clacked his four mandibles together: an Elite approximation of a shrug. "Were it so easy," he remarked in his deep voice. He made to move past the Master Chief, but the Spartan pushed him back, so he turned and walked away. "We must go. The Brutes have our scent."

Johnson laughed at that. "Then they must love the smell of bad ass." He grabbed an assault rifle from a nearby Marine and held it out to the Chief. Swiftly, the Spartan snatched it, annoyed by the Elite's presence.

****This was . . . mild. Feel free to call me lazy, I'm just putting this on here for you guys, if you want it of course. I'm making a pledge " to get to the arrival of the Flood " it's a milestone that I've never seen passed in a Halo novelization. If there is one, feel free to slap me silly, and point me in the right direction.****

****I'm calling the Arbiter by his title, rather than his name. Just so you know.****

****Review please guys, and here's hoping for an epic sequel in Halo 4!****

2. Sierra 117

****Hey, what's up, guys?****

****I haven't yet decided whether I'll split these mission chapters based on the different title sections. I probably will, but it depends on how long they are. The Covenant, I'll definitely split, for example, and I'll likely split the Storm and the Ark too.****

****Feel free to grill me if I get the military and combat stuff wrong. It's my first time at doing that stuff. Grill me. Like a rare steak, with all those delicious juices. Mmmmm| ****

****Creative credit goes to Bungie. Thanks go to Halo Nation.****

_Sierra 117 _

In the African jungles, several new creatures were prowling through the bush. The local wildlife stayed low, crouched in the undergrowth, unnerved by these ursine brutes.

At the crater where the Master Chief had fallen, Sergeant Johnson turned towards the Arbiter, as the Elite continued to walk away and

waved his arm towards the alien. "First Squad, you're my scouts. Move out! Quiet as you can," said Johnson.

The Marines nodded, and began to file out of the clearing, past the crater where the slab of metal the Master Chief had used to shield himself from the friction of reentry had fallen, through a moss-walled rock passage that was open to the sky, weapons at the ready, the Chief taking point as the squad scaled a short ledge. He clutched the assault rifle that Johnson had given him, and he'd been able to prise open the magnum holster at his hip. He hefted the MA5C in his hands — stronger than the MA5B, but with a smaller clip. His battle rifle had been melted into slag on the descent from the Dreadnought.

Johnson tapped his communicator as the Marines approached a small waterfall. "Bravo Team, this is Johnson. We got him. Fall back to the extraction point. Over."

"Roger that," replied a stern voice over the radio. "Reynolds out." —

A Brute howled off in the distance.

"That sounded close," whispered one of the Marines, as the Master Chief and the Arbiter made their way to the front, coming out past the right side of a pool in the river.

"Yeah, too close," replied another Marine quietly.

"Johnson, you be advised," came the voice of Reynolds over the COM. "Hostiles are —{static}— on the move —{static}—. I've got eyes on a —{static}— Brute Pack —{static}—. Over." —

"Say again, Gunny?" asked Johnson. "You're breaking up."

Then, there was the ominous whisper of gravitational drives as a massive purple craft shaped like a curved leaf — a Covenant Phantom — flew overhead above the trees. Another followed, though it was headed to the right of their current position.

"Sergeant Major, Phantom inbound," whispered a Marine.

Johnson thought quickly and sighed. "We stick together, we're gonna get spotted," he said heavily. "We'll split up, and meet back at the LZ. Chief, go with the Arbiter, head toward the river. Second Squad, you're with me."

Johnson and Second Squad moved over to a rocky cliff, deployed quick-climbing gear, and then, moving with military precision, they climbed up the cliff by the waterfall.

"Keep an eye out for Bravo Team, Chief!" called Johnson, as the Chief looked up after him. "If the Brutes do have our scent, those boys are in a lot of trouble!"

Then, Johnson and the Second Squad crossed the river above the waterfall and ran out of sight.

As the Chief crossed the river, the Arbiter led the Chief up on some rocks around a pile of fallen logs, while First Squad waited to go

straight over, pointing out a Brute Captain Major in golden power armor that was leading a group of Grunts, obviously newly deployed from the Phantom. The Brute, like those the Chief had seen on the Dreadnought, rather than the hairy apes he'd fought previously on the Covenant holy city High Charity, was a bear like humanoid covered in armor, with thick gray skin, his only visible hair a trimmed beard, while the Grunts were little creatures only a few feet tall, wearing face masks and clad in red or orange armor that pointed up in a triangle to shield their methane tanks. The Grunts carried a mix of plasma pistols and needlers, while the Brute clutched a spiker â€" a weapon that the Chief hadn't seen them use on High Charity. It was rectangular, with twin blades attached to the end, and a curved hilt.

"Spread out, you whelps!" snarled the Brute Captain. "Find them!"

"Up ahead! Single Brute, plus backup!" whispered one of the Marines cautiously.

"He's got power armor, Chief!" added another.

The Master Chief readied his assault rifle, and checked the ammo readout. No-one answered, that single motion spoke more words than Johnson could in about thirty seconds. Behind him, the Arbiter pulled out a cylinder, and held it raised, ready to switch it on. Then, as one, they leaped over the edge and landed among the Brute and his Grunt subordinates, and the Arbiter activated the cylinder, causing a wedge of plasma to erupt out of each side of the weapon into twin blades of energy.

The Grunts shrieked, and began firing their weapons, but the Master Chief had already dropped three with a few quick bursts of fire. The Marines took out the rest before the Grunts could deal any serious damage, though one man stumbled, groaning as he clutched a plasma burn on his calf.

The Brute Captain leapt off his perch and rushed towards the Spartan in a fury, but the Chief smashed him in the face with his assault rifle, knocking his helmet off. The stunned Brute roared, and went berserk; charging the wounded Marine and killing him instantly from the force of the blow, and knocking down several other Marines, though his dazed vision prevented any major harm to them. Then, he gasped in pain, and fell to the floor, owing to the energy sword that was sticking out of his chest.

The Arbiter pulled the weapon out of the Brute with a sizzle. "The Prophets are liars, but you are fools to do their bidding!" he snarled at the Brute corpse.

The Chief frowned at the time wasting, but said nothing, and the Arbiter, sheathing his sword and pulling out a Covenant carbine, made his way over to them, and they moved along the shrouded riverside.

A couple of Phantoms drew near, each deploying a squad of Grunts and Brutes, blocking the advance of the Master Chief and his allies. Both the Master Chief and the Arbiter opened fire, bullets and radioactive projectiles braining the helpless Grunts where they stood. Three charged up the hill in a mad panic, but met their end in a torrent of 7.62mm rounds that also tore into a Brute and stripped him of his

power armor, leaving him wheezing, until he was finished off by the Arbiter, who turned to the other Brutes and proceeded to methodically shoot each in the head with his carbine as they proceeded up the hill. One of them, another gold armored Captain Major, dodged the carbine projectile and returned fire with his brute shot, narrowly missing both the Arbiter and the Master Chief. The massive grenade took out an unlucky Marine even as the doomed man returned fire, the AR rounds stripping the Brute's armor. Before the stunned creature could react, the Arbiter shot him in the head with his carbine.

Eventually, the Covenant forces were cleared, and the surviving Marines formed up at a winking flare at an underground cave.

"Those Brutes are tough," said one of the Marines who'd been hit by a berserking Brute as he gently felt his ribs.

"Grunts ain't no slouches either," muttered another Marine as she nursed a plasma burn on her forearm.

"Maybe the Brutes put something in their tanks," replied the first Marine.

The Arbiter snorted derisively. "The Grunts' new-found courage is but fear," he explained. "When we are victorious, all who serve the Prophets will be punished."

The squad readied their weapons, and proceeded down the passages. After advancing through the caves (during which the Arbiter was introduced to some of the native fauna), a massive forested expanse lay before them: a "Grunt Camp" of sorts. Sleeping Grunts littered the first half while a few Brutes, Jackals "crocodilian bipeds" clutching plasma weapons, and other Grunts patrolled the far hills.

"Sleepers! Take 'em out, nice and quiet!" whispered a Marine. Then he nearly yelped in surprise, and gestured up on the ridge at some Sniper Jackals. "Jackals, on the ridge! Stay low; looks like they've got carbines."

Suddenly, there was a chirp and a cackle from one of the Jackals, and the female Marine quickly yanked the first out of the way of the supersonic projectiles of the carbine fire.

"I hate it when I'm right!" yelled the Marine as the camp came to life.

The Master Chief kept his cool, opening fire with his assault rifle on the Grunts, shredding them in a torrent of thick blue blood as they rose. Beside him, the Arbiter picked off a few Jackals with his carbine as they retaliated with their own, before growling, taking out his energy sword and charging at the Brutes.

The Chief briefly wondered just what exactly the Elite was up to as he put several magnum rounds into the Jackals as they attempted to pick the Arbiter off with their weapons. Behind him, the Marines riddled the Grunts with bullets as the panicked creatures ran around in circles. Two Brutes batted some of the Grunts out of the way before charging at the squad with twin bellows of fury, only to meet the blade of the Arbiter, falling to their knees before his

attacks.

A trio of Grunts wounded a Marine with a barrage of plasma bolts, the Marine's quick reflexes saving him as he dodged behind a rock.. The Chief seized a needler and let loose, firing several crystalline projectiles at the Grunts. Seven stuck in one unlucky Major, and super-combined, exploding and killing the other two. He discarded the empty weapon, and dropped one last Jackal behind its shield with a shot from the magnum.

"Pelicans are en route, Chief, but I can't reach Bravo,"_ Johnson called over the COM. _"If you find 'em, get 'em to the extraction point." _

Though he knew that Johnson couldn't see him, the Chief nodded out of habit, and led the squad out beyond the encampment, where a pale blue armored Brute Bodyguard was torturing Gunnery Sergeant Reynolds on a log. Evidently, he had been too engrossed in the torture to notice the carnage just meters away.

"Tell me its location!" snarled the Brute Bodyguard.

"Kiss... my... ass," replied Reynolds weakly.

The Brute lifted him up, and prepared to snap the man's spine, when several bullets from the Marine's battle rifles brained the alien, splattering red-blue blood everywhere. Reynolds landed unsteadily on the log, righted himself, and then jumped down, grabbing a nearby assault rifle and joining the Master Chief and the squad. "Brute Chieftain," he explained with a gasp. "Phantom. Pinned us down... killed my men."

"We'll avenge them, Sergeant," the Master Chief reassured him.

The First Squad ran up to the left, and onto the log where the Brute had been torturing Reynolds, and continued on until they reached another cave. Two Jackal Snipers, distinguished by their glowing optical sight masks and their lack of shields, emerged from the foliage and opened fire with their carbines, but the Arbiter and one of the battle rifle wielding Privates quickly made short work of them.

"The river, hurry!" urged the Arbiter, earning a few annoyed glances from the Marines.

The minor UNSC force continued forward, towards further flare-lined caves and pushing towards the river, where Johnson had established an extraction point for Second Squad. They headed down a steep slope for some underground caves that lead to the river.

Suddenly, the Master Chief's vision lurched, and the image of Cortana played itself out across his visor. He could barely move, his vision seemed stretched, and it had gone darker than normal.

"Could you sacrifice me to complete your mission? Could you watch me die?" asked the image of Cortana. Then, the image vanished, and the Chief's vision and balance returned to normal, a net of blue lines clearing his HUD.

"Sir, you okay?" asked the corpsman. "Your vitals just pinged

KIA."

Suddenly, they heard the unmistakable sound of Phantom engines, and flattened themselves against the cave walls.

* * *

><p>Second Squad was just leaving another set of caves; the river was around the next bend. Three Marine corpses were scattered on the ground, with battle rifle ammunition and fragmentation grenades.<p>

Johnson quickly barked into his radio as a pack of Brutes and Grunts emerged from more caves. _"Chief, Pelicans are at the river. We've got company, so hustle up!"_

"Grenades!" yelled the Arbiter as he rounded the corner, heading for the steep slope. 'Blow them to bits!"

The Master Chief swiped two grenades from a case by his feet, as well as a battle rifle lying by a Marine's corpse, dropping his magnum and readying the rifle.

Beyond the steep slope was a river substation next to a raging river. A pair of Pelican dropships - the extraction force to evacuate the Master Chief and his team - hovered above the river as the gunners in their troop bays fired upon a cluster of Covenant troops that had tunneled themselves in the substation. The helpless Grunts were slaughtered within seconds, while the few Brute Minors that foolishly remained in the open put up more resistance.

"Hold on. Got a contact," warned one of the pilots over her radio.

As the Master Chief and the Marines opened fire on the Covenant forces that were closer to the Pelicans, two Banshees streaked in along the river. The glittering purple aircraft's engines screeched in a manner that was all too familiar to many of the Marines present.

"Banshees! Fast and low!" cried the first pilot.

Echo 51's Pilot panicked, and quickly replied. _"Break off â€" now!"

—

The Banshees quickly launched a high-speed strafing run against the Pelicans, and explosions cascaded over them as the Pelicans rocked from the blasts. Echo 51's wingman collided with Echo 51. The Master Chief could only watch helplessly as he fired a battle rifle burst into the unprotected flank of a purple shielded Jackal Major, slaying the alien as it brought its overcharging plasma pistol to bear on the Arbiter.

"Watch yourself!" yelled Echo 51 to the other pilot.

"I'm hit!" screamed the other pilot. _"ARRGH!"_

"Lost a thruster," called Echo 51. _"Hang on!"_

"Get a hold of her!" barked Johnson over the COM.

"Negative! We're going down!" yelled Echo 51.

Both Pelicans streaked away around the river bend. Echo 51, in a futile attempt to gain altitude, skimmed the top of a cliff and crashed out of sight.

The wingman attempted to do the same, but, having suffered more damage than Echo 51, immediately plunged into the river beyond the dam, drowning all of the Pelican's occupants within minutes.

The Master Chief, the Arbiter, and the Marines fought through the remaining Covenant to secure the substation - despite two waves of Brute-led Covenant Loyalist reinforcements.

First, the Chief focused on the three Jackal Snipers that had scaled the substation, dropping them easily with the battle rifle. The Master Chief quickly switched to the assault rifle, dropped a few remaining Grunts with short bursts, and then threw a stolen plasma grenade at a blue armored Brute Major. The deadly sphere adhered to its armor, and the shocked alien dove into the river, where they heard the grenade explode. Seconds later, the Brute's charred corpse drifted to the surface.

The Arbiter ducked into a crouch and fired his carbine, the radioactive projectile knocking a turquoise armored Brute Minor's helmet off, and the panicked Brute dropped his spiker and ran at the Arbiter. The Arbiter didn't even bother using his energy sword, finishing the Minor off with a blow to the head from his carbine's hilt, before scooping up the two spike grenades the Brute had dropped. Then a blue beam of energy sizzled past the Elites head, dropping his shields. The Arbiter ducked behind cover as the Jackal Sniper in a tree across the river attempted to put a hole through his head with its beam rifle. Quickly, the Arbiter returned fire as his shields recharged, and the Jackal's corpse dropped out of the trees.

The Master Chief looped up around the side of the substation, saw a lilac armored Grunt Ultra climbing a weapon rack, and blew it away with a burst from the MA5C. He next brought the rifle to bear on a Brute Captain Major, but the Arbiter had already lobbed a spike grenade at the Brute. The spikes of the cylinder dug painfully into the Brute's ankle, and the grenade quickly detonated, painting the ground with blue-red blood. The shrapnel brained a trio of unfortunate Grunts, though the shards simply bounced off the Jackals shields. Before the stunned aliens could respond, the Master Chief tossed another fragmentation grenade, and the explosion finished off the Jackals and shattered a Brute Major's power armor. The Marines continuous fire quickly slew the Brute before he could berserk.

Up on the cliff, Johnson and his team exited the wreck of Echo 51 but were beset by a Brute ambush.

The Arbiter growled. "The Banshees will return. Hurry, back into the jungle!" he called, leading a charge up around the substations edge, ducking into a broad passageway in the moss-covered cliffs. The Master Chief followed, making use of the plentiful fragmentation grenades to blow the life out of four Grunts and the violet armored Brute Captain that led them.

_"Chief, can you hear me?__(static)___My bird's down,"_ called Johnson over the radio. _"Half a klick -__(static)___- downriver from your position." _

The Master Chief nodded, and saw the rock open up into a large alleyway, no doubt laced with Jackal Snipers. And sure enoughâ€¦|

"Jackals. On the ridge," whispered a Marine. "Stay low. Looks like they got carbines."

The Arbiter pulled out his own carbine, and dropped a Jackal with a quick burst. The Marines with battle rifles followed his example, ambushing the startled aliens and painting the alleyway a delightful shade of purple. The Master Chief leapt up to where the first Jackal Sniper had been, and grabbed his beam rifle, tossing the weapon to the Arbiter. The Arbiter nodded his thanks, and quickly picked off another Jackal. After they'd passed through the short Jackal-laden "Sniper Alley", they saw a bridge. Three Marines were crossing it, under heavy fire, retreating from the wreckage of Echo 51.

They heard Johnson's grim voice over the COM unit as a Brute led a charge against the fleeing Marines._"Come on, you dumb apes! You want breakfast? You gotta catch it!"_Johnson and some of the Marines promptly fragged the Brute and his fellow soldiers on the bridge, and ran off into a cave.

The next few minutes blurred into one another, with the Marines and the Chief encountering many hostiles, including another Captain. Dealing with him would have been easier were it not for the Jackals that opened fire on them. The Arbiter quickly slew the lone Jackal that wielded a beam rifle, grabbing the weapon as it toppled from the ledge and discarding his lesser charged one, while the Master Chief put the other Sniper out of action. He turned around a rock to confront the Brute, only to see the alien lying dead on the ground, riddled with bullets. Unfortunately, a Marine had joined him, slain by super-combining needler rounds.

Another Phantom dropped off a squad of Grunts, while a black and red armored Brute Chieftain on the side of the Phantom used the Plasma Cannon mounted at the edge to kill two of the Marines before they could return fire and score the side of the Master Chief's assault rifle. The Phantom flew off when his other gunner and many of his troops were eliminated, though that didn't stop the enraged Arbiter from attempting to pick him out of the Phantom's bay with beam rifle fire.

Eventually, they arrived at the crash site of the unfortunate Echo 51, abandoned at the riverside. The pilot was dead, but a few surviving Marines were still guarding the area, littered with corpses from both sides. The Chief and the Arbiter secured the area, while the Marines loaded up on weaponry. The Pelican had flipped over after hitting the cliff, scattering ammunition and weapon racks, including two sniper rifles and other munitions, around the crash site. The crashed dropship, lying on an outcropping along the valley wall, was surrounded by assault rifles, battle rifles, and frag grenades, and the Pelican's radio was still operational.

The Chief scooped up the sniper rifle, discarding his battered assault rifle, and then moved over to attempt to get the radio

working, but a voice suddenly came over the radio. _"Echo Five-One, this is Crow's Nest. Echo Five-One, please respond!" _There was a pause. _"Hocus, Five-One is down. Divert for emergency evac, over."

—

"Again, the Brutes show their weakness," remarked the Arbiter with relish as the Marines regrouped.

"Sergeant Major went this way, Chief," said one of the new Marines. "Through the cave."

The Master Chief led the Arbiter and the accompanying Marines across the shaking bridge, toward the caves towards where Johnson was being held. Unfortunately, a Captain Major was blasting the bridge with a brute shot, while seven Grunts fired needlers at the Marines.

The Chief tossed a frag grenade, killing two of the Grunts and stunning the Brute, allowing the Marines to gun him down. Then he finished off the Grunts with the battle rifle, using a burst for each.

At the end of the caves, the Master Chief and the Arbiter reached a low cliff, viewing a Loyalist-held dam. The Arbiter spotted Brute Chieftain beating Sergeant Johnson soundly on the far left in front of a small building.

"See how they bait their trap?" remarked the Arbiter pointing at the Chieftain roaring at Johnson. Johnson punched the Chieftain in the stomach with no effect. "I will help you spring it."

The Chieftain growled loudly and kicked Johnson back inside the "prison". Johnson stumbled as he fell through the doorway.

The Master Chief opened fire with his sniper rifle on the Jackal Snipers. Two went down before the shocked Covenant troops could collect their wits. The Arbiter picked off the last Sniper, who was directly below them, and managed to knock a Brute Bodyguard's helmet off. Then, the Marines leapt down, and Chief and the Arbiter brained the Jackals behind their shields as the panicked aliens attempted to regroup.

They made their way up to the edge of the dam, and then opened fire on the Brutes as they battled their way across, taking down the Chieftain's shields with two frag grenades and a sniper round before he could lift his hammer. The Chieftain swung the massive gravity hammer and took out a Marine, but the Chief dodged the swing, giving the Arbiter ample time to distract the Chieftain with an energy sword to the face. The Chief next blasted a Brute Bodyguard with battle rifle fire, then discarded the empty weapon and grabbed a needler, firing several crystalline shards at the Brute, which homed in on it's the alien, impaled in its flesh, and super-combined, taking the Brute out in a pink explosion. The Arbiter bashed in the shields of a Jackal with the butt of his beam rifle, before snapping the aliens neck.

They turned left, and engaged more Brutes, using their stolen spike grenades to take out two Minors in a blast of shrapnel. A Brute Captain leveled his spiker at them and opened fire, draining the Chief's shields. The Spartan ducked behind a column to give his shields a chance to recharge, while the Arbiter tossed a plasma

grenade at the Brute, though the grenade missed, the resulting explosion destroyed the Brute's power armor, and he charged, knocking the Arbiter into the wall.

The Master Chief seized the moment to brain the alien with his last sniper rifle round.

Splitting up around the building, they broke down the door to the cramped room, and finally reached Johnson, who'd been tied up and imprisoned behind a plasma shield.

Johnson laughed, though there was little humor in it. "This isn't as fun as it looks. Cut the power!" he called gruffly.

"Brutes were gonna gut us, sir," added some more Marines that were similarly imprisoned.

The Master Chief released the plasma shield that was imprisoning Johnson and his fellow Marines.

Johnson sighed in relief, and quickly stretched. "We're even, as long as we're only counting today," he remarked with a tired grin. "Kilo 023, what's your ETA?" he asked over the COM.

"Imminent, Sergeant," came the response. _"Find some cover. Gotta clear a path."_

Johnson and the Marines grabbed some Covenant weaponry from nearby weapon racks. The Arbiter followed suit, discarding the depleted beam rifle for a carbine. "Roger that, Hocus," said Johnson, checking the magazine of his needler. "Friendly gunship, coming in hot!" he called.

Two Phantoms arrived, carrying Covenant reinforcements. The Chief, the Arbiter, Johnson and the Marines held position in the building for shelter, and opened fire, cutting down the newly deployed Grunts, who began to run around like headless chickens before long, impeding the furious Brutes. The Chief could hear the Arbiter's raging at the Brutes, and feverishly hoped he wouldn't charge into the open again until Kilo 23 arrived.

"Hocus! Phantom!" yelled Johnson, super-combing a Brute's arm.

"I see 'em!" came the reply. _"Standby. Going loud. Everyone down!"_ Everyone complied, as the Pelican Drop Ship Kilo 23 rounded the river bend, directly in front of the two hovering Phantoms. Hocus, Kilo 23's pilot, let loose a missile barrage, etching the air with vapor contrails as the first Phantom exploded in a brilliant coruscation of light.

"Scratch one Phantom!" laughed Hocus. Kilo 23 fired two missile barrages at the second Phantom, destroying its engines and sending it plunging into the river. _"Scratch two!"_ she crowed. Then, Hocus lowered the Pelican to the dam for pickup. Johnson, the Master Chief, the Arbiter and the remaining Marines boarded Kilo 23 in relief.

As the Pelican took off, Johnson gave the Chief a pat on the shoulder appreciatively and went into the cockpit. The back hatch closed and Kilo 23 flew over the first dam, en route to the Crow's Nest base.

* * *

><p>In an area in the jungle, sentries on watch spotted Kilo 23 on approach.<p>

"IFF confirmed. Contact is Pelican Dropship Kilo 23. Over," radioed in one of the sentries as his fellow trained a rocket launcher on the Pelican.

"Roger that," replied the controller. _"What's the word, Kilo 23?"_

"Sierra 117 on board," said Hocus with a small grin. _"Request priority clearance. Over."_

The two Marine sentries bumped their fists and smiled.

"Deck's yours. Come on down," said the controller.

Kilo 23 proceeded to descend into a massive hole in the ground.

Okay, that was my first combat chapter, so it's probably very shaky. Now, **_do I need to spruce this up?*_** (Okay, yes, I probably do.) Is it too fast? I once read an incomplete novelization of Halo 3 where that seemed to be the case. I don't want to do what Dietz ended up doing for The Flood, either. And I know that I haven't stated many Marine deaths, except the drowning by Pelican, but it'll definitely end up happening.**

It's a good thing that there are some Covenant in Halo 4 (and Elites, yes!) Although, I'm still concerned about the fact that they will be "the least of your problems." The last time that ended up happening, we were introduced to the Flood. This time, it seems just as horrific; what with the skulls inside the Promethean Knight A.I.s. Seriously, are those real skulls, or just pretty things?

I only just used the Beam Rifle for this chapter after getting it on Heroic for the first time and instantly falling in love with it. It's such a sick weapon, and I'm glad that it's back in Halo 4.

Evaluate, this is pretty much my first action scene!

3. Crow's Nest

Halo: The Installation.

**Heeeeeeeeeere's Sanokal! Hey, I'm here again, with Crow's Nest! Yeah, here it is! **

And bloody hell, this chapter was a frigging nightmare to write. I just kept on tweaking and tweaking it.

Crow's Nest.

"Sorry for the tight squeeze," said the controller apologetically, as the Pelican settled into the hangar. He turned to the other flight controller. "Tell the Commander her ace is in the hole."

Pelican Dropship Kilo 023 touched down on the floor. Off to the side, a pair of medics loaded an injured Marine on a stretcher and moved him off the space of floor that he'd been occupying for several minutes. The Master Chief, the Arbiter and Johnson got off the Pelican, watched by some Marines sitting by the landing pad on a few crates.

"Hey. Check it out," whispered the first, noticing the towering Spartan.

"No way! A Spartan?!" gasped another Marine as he looked up.

"For real?" asked a third, blinded by his injuries as he swiveled his head. "You better not be..."

"No man, he's here! We're gonna be alright!" replied the second Marine confidently.

A brown-haired woman in a gray commander's uniform emerged onto the landing pad to meet Johnson, the Arbiter and the Master Chief. Lieutenant Commander Miranda Keyes, another survivor of the Delta Halo find, turned to Johnson. "Where'd you find him?" she asked, gesturing to the Chief.

"Napping. Out back," replied Johnson, lighting a cigar.

They saluted, as she saluted back and smiled. "Hmm, I'll bet," replied Commander Keyes. "It's good to see you Chief," she said, shaking the Chief's hand.

"Likewise, ma'am," responded the Master Chief courteously.

"Let's get you up to speed," said Keyes, leading them down the hallways.

Down the hallways of the base, wounded Marines lay against the walls. Two Marines chatting to each other noticed Commander Keyes and the Master Chief, making way for the group and saluting the two.

"The Prophet of Truth's ships breached the Lunar perimeter," explained Commander Keyes, her voice thick. "Smashed what was left of the Home Fleet."

As the Arbiter walked by, the Marines lowered their hands and stared in astonishment at the massive Elite " and at the fact that he was walking free.

"Terrestrial casualties from the subsequent bombardment were..." she stopped as medics raced by with an injured Marine on a stretcher. Johnson knelt down, and tended to another injured Marine. "...extreme," finished Commander Keyes heavily. "Truth could've landed anywhere, but he committed all his forces here. East Africa. The ruins of New Mombasa. Then, they started digging."

"What about Halo?" asked the Master Chief as they reached the operations center and walked down the stairs to the videoscreens. His concerns regarding Halo were many. The reason he'd left Cortana behind on High Charity was to destroy the Delta Halo if the need arose, and both Johnson and Keyes had been headed for the ringworld

the last time he'd seen them, imprisoned by the Chieftain of the Brutes, Tartarus, with the Halo's Activation Index in hand. Yet here they were, alive and well.

"We stopped it, but only temporarily," replied Keyes. "Now, the Prophet of Truth is looking for something called 'The Ark', where he'll be able to fire all the Halo Rings. If he succeeds, Humanity, the Covenant, every sentient being in the Galaxy..." she broke off, a sad look in her eyes.

The Chief understood well enough. "The rings will kill us all," he finished grimly.

"Ma'am, I have Lord Hood," called a technician.

"Patch him through," replied Keyes, turning to the screen.

The image of Lord Terence Hood appeared on the main screen. Hood was a grim faced bald headed man wearing white Naval dress uniform, uniform which he'd remained in since the Covenant's interruption of the awards ceremony that was being held at the Cairo Station.

"Good news, Commander Keyes?"_ he asked as he put his cap back on.

"As good as it gets, sir," replied Keyes subtly indicating the Chief.

"So I see,"_ said Lord Hood, looking at the Master Chief with a weary smile. _"What's your status, son?"_ _

"Green," replied the Chief promptly. "Sir."

"Glad to hear it,"_ replied Lord Hood. _"The Commander's come up with a good plan. But without you, I wasn't sure we could pull it off."_

Keyes took over. "Truth's ships are clustered above the excavation site," she explained. "And his infantry has deployed anti-aircraft batteries around the perimeter. But, if we neutralize one of the batteries, punch a hole in Truth's defenses..."

"I'll initiate a low-level strike,"_ finished Lord Hood. _"Hit 'em right where it hurts. I only have a handful of ships, Master Chief. It's a big risk. But I'm confidentâ€"_"_

Suddenly, the power cut completely, plunging the room into darkness, with only the red emergency lights providing any light.

"Hell! Not again!" yelled the technician in frustration.

"Emergency generators! Now!" said Commander Keyes.

"Shielding failed," said the technician, shaking his head. "They're down and charging."

"As soon as they're up, re-establish contact with Lord Hood," said Keyes. "Let him know that-"

"You are, all of you, vermin,"_ snarled a guttural voice from the

videoscreens as the room lit up. Everyone looked up, startled by the sudden appearance of a brown skinned humanoid with a hunched back, long neck, red robes concealing him and a golden crown sitting on top of his domed, triangular head "the High Prophet of Truth, de facto leader of the Covenant since his fellow Prophets had died at the hands of the Master Chief. "Cowering in the dirt, thinking what, I wonder?" continued Truth. "That you might escape the coming fire? No. Your world will burn until its surface is but glass! And not even your Demon will live to creep, blackened from its hole to mar the reflection of our passage... the culmination of our Journey," he said, putting his fingers together in satisfaction. "For your destruction is the will of the gods! And I?" he asked, slamming his fist on his throne. "I am their instrument!"

The image of the Prophet disappeared, the power returned, and the lights came back on.

Johnson scoffed past the cigar clamped in his teeth. "Cocky bastard. Just loves to run his mouth!"

"Does he usually mention me?" asked the Master Chief, looking at his friend. For his part, he was thinking about Truth's manner, the even, calm air of the Prophet from High Charity was gone, replaced by a furious hatred. The only time he'd ever heard Truth speak like this before was when the Prophet had ordered his guards to kill him when they'd first met.

Commander Keyes thought for a few seconds, and then realized the full impact of Truth's meaning. "Give the order," she said to the technicians. "We're closing shop."

"Ma'am?" asked a technician in confusion.

"We're about to get hit," explained Keyes.

"All personnel! Defense code Alpha-one. Prepare for immediate evacuation!" called the technician over the intercom.

"The wounded," said Keyes, turning to Johnson. "We're getting them all out."

Johnson nodded. "If I have to carry 'em myself," he replied, conviction in his words.

"Ma'am, squad leaders are requesting a rally point. Where should they go?" asked a technician.

Miranda walked up the stairs and drew a pistol, pulling the slide back. "To war," she replied grimly, before she let go and moved on.

"We just lost the perimeter cameras," said a technician suddenly.

"Motion trackers?" asked Keyes.

"They're down or we're not receiving," replied the technician. "Can't tell."

"Any of our birds squawking?" Keyes asked, walking back to the front

of the room.

"No ma'am," replied the technician. "Wait, Overwatch has contacts. Phantoms, closing in on our position."

Keyes nodded. "Any birds less than five minutes out, bring them in," she ordered. "Tell everything else to scatter."

"Aye aye," replied the technician.

"Who would've thought we'd have this many wounded?" whispered another technician in concern.

"Pelicans are gonna take extra time to load," agreed the third.

"We knew they'd find us eventually," pointed out Commander Keyes. "But we have a plan, let's make it happen."

"Yes, ma'am!" responded all of the personal.

Sergeant Johnson turned to the Master Chief. "Arbiter and I will guard the Ops Center," he said. "Don't worry about the Commander, Chief. I got her. But the Marines downstairs could use your help." The tall Elite standing next to him nodded silently, flexing his long fingers.

The Master Chief nodded, and hurried out of the room. He was going to need a weapon. He met up with two Marines from downstairs.

"Follow me, sir," said one.

"Perimeter's this way," added the second.

The Chief followed the Marines downstairs, and rounded a corner.

"Come on, sir. I'll show you the way," said the first Marine, opening a door. The Chief looked around the room: it was filled with many weapons to stock up on. "This base was built for some 20th-century war. It's full of old tech, like these door controls," explained the Marine, snagging a pistol and moving to another door. The Master Chief nodded, and grabbed twin SMG's and a battle rifle, before pocketing fragmentation grenades and ammunition. The Marine opened the door, and the Chief walked on through to find Marines in a large cave setting up defenses for the Ops Center, directed by Reynolds, the Sergeant from Bravo Team, standing up the top with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Get those turrets up," called Reynolds. "You watch your fields of fire!"

"How'd they find us?" asked one Marine, nervously patting his assault rifle.

A second chuckled. "Probably just smelled you, man," he joked.

"Hey, bite me. I'm sick of hiding anyways," retorted the first Marine.

"Quiet," ordered Reynolds. "Cut the chatter."

"What is it, Sergeant?" asked a Marine.

"Calm before the storm, Marines," explained Reynolds. "Enjoy it."

Suddenly, there was a massive distant explosion, and the cave shook, knocking all the Marines off balance.

"Point of entry, best assessment?" asked Reynolds quickly, regaining his footing.

"The hangar, Sergeant," offered a Marine.

Reynolds nodded. "Agreed. Master Chief, get there."

The Master Chief nodded and headed out the door, proceeded on, and met up with two Marines halfway to the hanger.

"We're with you, Chief," said one of the Marines in a distinctive Australian accent. The Master Chief realized with a slight jolt of surprise that it was Private Chips Dubbo, a Marine that he'd served with on both Halo Installations.

"Yeah, get some!" chimed in Dubbo's companion.

Dubbo spared a grin. "Squad down in the hangar's real shorthanded, Chief," he explained.

"If we don't get there quick, they're gonna get rolled," admitted the other Marine.

The Chief grabbed some fragmentation grenades from a weapons case near the door and tossed them to Dubbo, then opened the door and let the Marines lead the way. They turned right, and the Chief opened another door.

"Chief?" said Commander Keyes over the COM. "Good, this channel is secure. My fire-teams are spread thin. We can't hold out forever. I need that hangar cleared for evac, ASAP."

"Those Brutes secure the hangar; we won't be able to get our birds out," said the Marine as they turned right down another corridor. Then the Marines found the vehicle access down the left alcove. As the Chief opened the door he saw that a Warthog was in battle with many Covenant soldiers. A few Grunts lobbed plasma grenades, destroying it and slaying the driver, but the gunner leapt out, cracking his head on the concrete. He groaned, clutching an assault rifle as he held his head in his other hand, and was felled by a plasma bolt that caught him in the neck before the Chief or the other Marines could help him.

Dubbo gave a yell of fury and opened fire, slaying a Grunt before the startled alien could react, spilling blue blood on the ground. His companion took out another, and threw himself behind a crate to escape from a flurry of needles as the Covenant retaliated.

Then the Master Chief opened fire on the Grunts with his twin SMG's. The caseless bullets ripped into the Covenant troops, killing five within a few seconds. The rest returned fire, glancing off the Master

Chief's shields and dropping them to half their levels.

Still, that was enough for the Chief to dive behind cover and wait for his shields to recharge.

Two Jackals moved in, overcharging their plasma pistols. Dubbo managed to put a few magnum rounds into the one on the left, slipping past its blue shield. The alien shrieked and collapsed, dead.

The Master Chief seized his chance and leapt out, pumping bullets from the twin M7's into the Jackal's shield, throwing the Jackal off balance. He emptied the clips of the guns into the exposed flank of the Jackal, and then ducked behind a battered truck to reload.

A Brute Major stepped out from behind a door and leveled his spiker at the Marines, who dodged out of the way of the red-hot spikes. The Chief jumped over the truck in a blur of ceramic armor and unloaded the twin SMG's into the Brute, stunning him and breaking the clasps of his armor. The Brute looked at himself in horror, realizing that he was defenseless. That was the last thought that went through his mind as the Chief pumped bullets from the SMG's into the alien's skull.

"He's gonna kill us all!" screamed a Grunt, and the rest went into full-blown panic mode.

A quick frag grenade and the Grunts that had accompanied the Brute were down.

While Dubbo and his friend took potshots at the Jackal Snipers that were attempting to put holes through the Marines head's with their carbines, the Master Chief heard a faint voice, and continued to the end of the vehicle access, where there was a Marine knocking on the door, asking for the doorman to let him in.

* * *

><p>Private Gusto "Simmons" Sorola had had better days. The Covenant attack on Crow's Nest had caught everyone completely by surprise, but he'd been stuck on the toilet when the announcement had taken place. He'd heard that Private Burns had tried to get through the door to the ammo bunker earlier, but "Caboose" Heyman had thought that he was slightly forgetful, when he really was being completely forgetful.

He sighed in relief as the Master Chief came down the bypass. "Good to see you sir!" he said. "I'm just trying to get this door open and get some ammo. These pansies have been locked in here the whole damn time." He rapped loudly on the door. "Hey, open up!"

"Password!" called the voice of the man behind the door.

Simmons groaned inwardly â€" he knew that voice. Private Geoff "Grif" Ramsey was definitely going to make this difficult for them. "What?" he asked.

"Need the password!" explained Grif.

Simmons gritted his teeth. "You gotta be kidding me! What password?"

"Password!" replied Grif. "They gave it out at the staff meeting fifteen minutes ago!"

"Meeting? What meeting?!" asked Simmons. "I was out here!"

"Not supposed to let anyone in without it!" said Grif from behind the door.

Simmons seethed. "If the staff meeting just ended, no one outside is gonna know the freaking password! Now open up! We need ammo, and the Chief is out here!" he yelled.

There was a brief pause, and then Grif asked. "Does he know the password?"

"He wasn't at the meeting either!" raged Simmons, banging on the door.

He felt an armoured hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry about him," said the Master Chief.

Simmons sighed. "Saldana tried to get in earlier, but the Doc seemed to think that he was either a Brute, or in league with them. I mean, come on! There's a security camera here, why didn't he just check? He even told him to go ask the Brutes for ammo."

"Good idea," said the Chief, producing the Major's spiker, and handing it to the Marine.

Simmons grinned. "Oh, now that's sweet," he said.

* * *

><p>With Simmons trailing behind him, the Master Chief returned to where Dubbo and the other Marine were holding out. The last remaining Jackal Sniper didn't expect to see the Spartan sprint round the corner, nor did he expect the battle rifle burst that shattered his skull.<p>

Scooping up the alien's carbine and the spare ammunition, the Chief headed down the hallways to the hangar.

Soon the Chief and the Marines reached the hangar. The Chief smashed the butt of the carbine through a Grunt's head before it could react, and then fired, slaying a Grunt Major. He looped left and up the stairs, firing through the gap of a Jackal's blue shield and smashing its wrist. The Jackal turned to run, but just received a projectile in the back for its efforts.

"Wipe those bastards off the deck!" yelled the Marine that had accompanied Dubbo, and he started by catching a Jackal with a red shield off guard, shredding its flank with his assault rifle.

"Pelicans can't launch until the hangar's clear!" cried another Marine as he emptied an SMG clip into a duo of Grunts.

The Master Chief took aim with the stolen carbine and put a radioactive pellet through a Brute Major's skull. The other Brutes

wheeled and fired, their spiker fire taking the Chief's shields down, forcing the Spartan behind cover.

Then, one of the Brutes crumpled under spiker fire as Simmons pelted them with the stolen spiker the Master Chief had given him. The bewildered Brutes thought they were under friendly fire until the spikes stripped a Captain Major of his armor.

"Today you die, Demon!" roared a Brute furiously.

The Master Chief, shields regenerated, threw his carbine over to Dubbo, and Dubbo tossed him an assault rifle. The Chief riddled the Captain Major with bullets, and then ducked to avoid the brute shot grenade that whistled over his head, and took out a large chunk of his shields. He pointed the assault rifle over the sandbags and fired a wild burst to disrupt the Brutes. The Chief grabbed the handles of the heavy machine gun turret and pumped the bullets into a group of Grunts. A stray needle embedded itself in his shoulder, and he quickly yanked it out before it could detonate.

Suddenly his shields dropped as a blast from a Jackal's overcharged plasma pistol connected with his chest. The Chief tossed a fragmentation grenade and ducked down to let the shields of the Mark VI recharge. An instant later, the Chief heard a panicked shriek as the grenade detonated.

The Marines secured the deck, dropping the last Brute with a hail of 7.62mm bullets. A Phantom dropped more Covenant troops into the hangar, attempting to take it. From a distance, the Chief caught a glimpse of Hornets and Banshees engaged in an aerial fight near a Cruiser " which kept supplying the Covenant reinforcements to the base. The Chief and Simmons took the turrets and defended the hangar, opening fire. Four Grunts fell under the heavy rounds, but there were too many, and Simmons had to duck away from the fire.

The Master Chief however, did not have to do this. The Spartan grabbed the turret firmly and ripped it free from its stand. The ammunition was now limited, but that didn't matter to the Chief as he pumped the bullets through a cyan armored Brute Ultra, dodging the carbine fire. The Jackals ducked behind their shields, but the heavy bullets dispelled the shields within seconds and finished them off.

The Phantoms retreated and their troops fell under an onslaught of various bullet types. The Chief took care of the Brutes, leaving the Jackals and Grunts to the Marines. First, he tracked down a Brute Major as it reloaded its brute shot, and put several heavy rounds through the Brute's skull. Then he felt an impact as a Brute Captain slammed the butt of its plasma rifle on the Chief's shoulder, and the Chief leapt forward, twisting in midair and fired, shattering the Brute's chest armor and piercing its sternum.

Simmons had retaken the other turret, and strafed a pair of Jackals as they attempted to flank the Master Chief. Dubbo was finishing off a group of Grunts from his position behind a deployable energy shield.

The last of the Covenant troops fell dead to the deck, and the Pelican that was hanging on a crane in one of the docks slid out and was released. The dropship landed to evacuate the Marines in the

hangar, while the Master Chief restocked on weapons and ammo in the storage locker up above, reloading the battle rifle, and scooping up another pair of SMG's.

"Chief, Ops Center. Double time! The Brutes are pressing hard",
ordered Sergeant Johnson over the COM.

Readying the battle rifle, the Chief headed back to the Ops Center. Marines continued pass by for evac. He reached the vehicle access, coming across two Marines that were staying behind until the next evac. Then, the Chief heard sounds of wings beating and metal banging in the ventilation pipes.

"Hey. You hear that?" whispered one Marine nervously, as the Master Chief passed by him.

"Yeah. And I don't like it," said the second, aiming his battle rifle at the pipes.

"Attention!" yelled Commander Keyes over the loudspeaker.
_"Hostiles reported outside the barracks." _

The Chief headed back into the corridors, with the two Marines following him. He took the right turn, and then the left over the damaged gratings.

"Barracks are under attack!" cried Keyes over the loudspeaker.
_"All available combat teams, respond!" _

The COM systems remained silent, but the banging and fluttering noises in the pipes continued on.

_"Anyone in the barracks, I need a sit-rep. Now!" _ordered Keyes desperately. The Master Chief ran through the final corner and up the stairs as fast as he could without leaving the two Marines behind.

The Master Chief finally met up with the Marines in the cave, defending the Ops Center.

"Sir, this way," called a Marine from beyond the mesh.

But behind him the Chief suddenly saw parts of a ventilation pipe falling down and a brown-green insectoid alien â€" a Covenant Drone â€" emerged from the pipes above the Marine and snatched him up.

The Marine screamed in terror as the alien lifted him into the air, but then found himself falling back to the ground, courtesy of a battle rifle burst from the Master Chief that had quickly put the Drone out of action.

"Look!" yelled a Marine, her voice ragged. "Coming outta the vents!"

A massive swarm of Drones started pouring out of the ventilation shafts, and engulfed the room.

"Light 'em up! Light 'em up!" yelled the Marine the Master Chief had saved, opening fire with his SMG.

"What the hell are these things, Sergeant?!" yelled the woman who'd alerted them earlier, as she fired her assault rifle wildly.

"Drones!" yelled Gunnery Sergeant Reynolds. "A whole swarm! Take 'em down! Short, controlled bursts!"

The Marines opened fire on the swarm. The Master Chief emptied his SMG's into the Drone swarm, but there were so many that it seemed the just soaked up the caseless rounds. He threw the guns down, sprinted to a vacant heavy machine gun turret and unloaded massive bullets on them. It only took one heavy bullet to put a Drone down for good, and, though two Marines went down under plasma fire, the swarm eventually fell. Marines in the Ops Center opened the doors, letting the Chief in.

"Go on, Sergeant Major is waiting for you upstairs," said Reynolds, panting as he walked to the door.

The Chief headed into the center, grabbing an assault rifle, while Reynolds headed upstairs. He hefted the weapon in his hands scooped up ammunition. He walked up the stairs and met up with Johnson smoking a cigar and other defending Marines that were setting up an explosive device, but the Arbiter wasn't with them. Miranda Keyes watched the effort over a videoscreen.

"If I try to hook up a timer, it might just go off by itself," muttered Gunnery Sergeant Reynolds, tinkering with the bomb.

"Johnson," commented Keyes over the videoscreen.

"Mm-hmm?" replied Johnson absentmindedly.

_"You might wanna put that out." _

Johnson shrugged, dropped his cigar and stamped on it, grinding the ash into the concrete.

"Chief, have a look," explained Keyes over the video. _"A little going-away gift for the Covenant. We've linked it to smaller charges throughout the base. Johnson, soon as the evacuation is complete, start the timer."_

Johnson nodded. "Understood," he replied gruffly.

Keyes gave them a smile. _"Good luck everyone. See you on the last Pelican out,"_ she said, disconnecting the feed.

As the Chief cast his eyes over the charges that Sergeant Reynolds was rigging, Johnson approached the Spartan. "Follow me, Chief," he said.

Johnson led the Chief to the back of the room, guarded by four Marines, and a weapons locker sat by it. "Brutes have taken the barracks. Marines are trapped inside," he explained grimly. "Those apes ain't much for mercy, Chief. We both know what they do to prisoners."

The Chief nodded grimly â€" the Arbiter had told him that, had they

been allowed, the Brutes would have devoured him once, and they made a sport of torture.

"Get to the barracks, save those men," ordered Johnson. "Then escort them to the Landing Pad for evac."

"What about the bomb?" asked the Master Chief.

"I'll guard the bomb Chief, get yourself to the barracks," replied Johnson, hefting an MA5C.

The Chief headed through the corridor to the Motor Pool. While down there, he spotted a Brute Pack " led by a Brute Chieftain with a gravity hammer.

"A fresh scent! Must be close," snarled a Brute Ultra.

"Spread out! Track it down!" ordered the Chieftain.

A trio of battle rifle bullets struck the Ultra that had spoken in the back of the head, sending him into spasms that shook off his armor. Another burst was sufficient to put him down.

The Brutes dispersed; the Chief took the pack and Chieftain head-on alone.

First, he focused on the Minors, stripping them of their armor with battle rifle fire as they attempted to return fire with their spikers. After tossing a plasma grenade that killed a Minor and destroyed the armor of a Major, the Chief sprinted behind a fallen container, and grabbed ammunition from a weapons rack. The wounded Minor and Major charged around the corner, and the Chief seized a shotgun, and blew both Brutes away.

He dropped the shotgun and swiped the battle rifle from the ground, reloading as he pondered the situation. Leaping up onto the container would be too slow and would expose him to more fire than he was willing to risk. He spotted a stray piece of Covenant equipment, prayed it was what he was looking for, and sprinted out from behind cover. The remaining Ultra tried to track him with carbine fire, but the Master Chief had grabbed the plate, and dragged it behind the container before it could get a bead on him. He hit the button on the top " and the device unfolded into a miniature gravity lift. He jumped into the lift, squeezed the trigger of the BR55HB just at the right moments, and the Ultra collapsed.

A Bodyguard, plasma rifle leveled, charged around the corner. "I claim great honor!" it roared.

The Master Chief stunned him with a strike from the butt of the battle rifle, then jumped into the gravity lift and fired, stripping the Bodyguard of his silver-blue power armor. The Bodyguard returned fire, dropping the Chief's shields, and the Chief spared a moment to throw a frag grenade at the Bodyguard guarding the Chieftain, before switching to the MA5C and opening fire on the Bodyguard, tearing through the Brute's flesh until it fell to the floor.

That left only the Chieftain, who hefted his massive gravity hammer and charged. "Damn you, Demon!" he yelled furiously. The Master Chief opened fire, but the green mist that surrounded the Brute regenerated

his shields as fast as the Chief depleted them. The Chief took aim at the device that generated the mist carefully, and shattered it with a quick burst.

Hefting his hammer, the Chieftain leapt down the stairs and brought it down, displacing the container and crushing his enemy.

Or at least, he would have, had the Master Chief not jumped into the gravity lift at the last second. The Spartan sailed over the Chieftain's head and emptied the clip of the assault rifle into his skull, then finished the shields of the Brute off with a quick punch to the back of his skull.

The Chieftain turned and swung, with only the Spartan's quick reflexes saving his life. He switched to the battle rifle as he leapt away from the Chieftain, and fired, emptying the rifle into the Chieftain's face.

The massive Brute swayed, and collapsed.

Having wiped the Brute Pack out, the Master Chief continued on through a corridor toward the barracks, but rounded a corner to find it caved in. Finding a hole in the floor, he jumped down into a shaft. At the bottom were several pipe entrances, which Drones flew in and out of, while there was a main, far larger pipe down the bottom.

Before the Drones could emerge, time seemed to slow, and the Chief's vision lurched as the image of Cortana appeared in his visor. "You have been called upon to serve," she said.

The Chief frowned. He knew those words; they'd been spoken by Dr Halsey when he'd first realized that he would be serving as a Spartan.

Then he banished those thoughts from his mind as he heard the Drones screech and fly out of the pipes, and he opened fire on the insects.

* * *

><p>The Arbiter roared as he defended himself from four of the Yanme'e Drones, the creatures flitting in the air. Three of them were the normal plasma pistol wielders, but one carried a needler and evaded all the Arbiter's attempts to slay it.<p>

"Half-wit insects! The Prophets use you like they used me!" yelled the Arbiter desperately. "Reject their lies! Rebel, or all your hives will perish!"

The Yanme'e responded with a barrage of plasma fire, so the Arbiter responded in kind, blasting a Drone to pieces with his twin plasma rifles. He snarled as his shields dropped, and he quickly slew another Drone, but the evasive Drone had moved in for the kill.

There was a rattle of human arms fire, and the Drone shrieked as it fell, wingless into the chasm beyond. The Arbiter seized his chance, and blasted the final Drone with his rifles, scorching its carapace.

He turned to his savior "the Spartan," and nodded to him. "Spartan, the Brutes have taken your soldiers," explained the bronze-armored Elite. "As prisoners or meat for their bellies, I do not know. In case some yet live, let us be careful when we shoot."

The Master Chief and the Arbiter headed through the door, just in time to see a captive Marine thrown hard into a pillar, where multiple Marine corpses and human weapons lay. The Marine died and fell limply to the ground, and the Chief and the Arbiter rushed in. One Marine being held by a Brute Major begged for mercy as the Covenant soldier decided to kill him, too.

"No! Please!" screamed the Marine desperately.

The Brute scoffed at the terrified Marine. "Look, it has soiled itself! These are whelps, not warriors!"

The barracks were filled with Brutes torturing Marines, including a Brute Captain Major holding a Marine by the ankle.

The Master Chief fired two bursts from the BR55HB at the Major's skull, slaying the Brute before it could snap the Marine's spine. The Marine fled towards the nearby weapons, grabbing a shotgun and blasting a Minor twice in the chest. "Close, too damn close," he whispered, wiping his forehead.

The Chief and Arbiter engaged the Brutes and released the prisoners. While the Marines rushed for weapons, the Chief and the Arbiter saved every prisoner they could, though in spite, the pair of Jackals in the rafters slew one of the Marines and (by accident) stripped a Captain Major of his armor. The Chief switched to the assault rifle and fired, dropping the Captain Major in a heap, then threw a spike grenade at the Jackals. There was a blast of shrapnel, and purple blood sprayed the area.

"Again, the Brutes show their weakness," said the Arbiter after slicing through two Brutes with his energy sword.

"Everyone on your feet! Grab a weapon!" yelled Gunnery Sergeant Stacker, another familiar face from the Master Chief's past missions involving the Halo Installations. Evidently, the Covenant had attacked the Ops Center again and captured most of the Marines right after the Chief had left them. He hoped that Sergeant Johnson had made it out.

"Payback time! OO-RAH!" cried one of the Marines proudly, grabbing her SMG.

Taking out the Brutes, the surviving ten Marines grabbed weapons from more piles of corpses, taking a second to grieve for their comrades while the Chief and the Arbiter resupplied and reloaded.

The group rounded the corner, and a blast of white light scorched the eyes of the Marines. The Brutes moved forward, slaying one unlucky Marine with a barrage of spikes. By then, the Arbiter's vision had recovered from the flare, and he blasted the offending Major with his plasma rifles.

The Brute collapsed, and an armor stripped Captain charged toward the

Arbiter. The Elite snarled, and swung with both rifles, caving in the alien's skull. Brute shot grenades forced the Marines back, killing another Marine. A furious Marine with a battle rifle jumped out and fired, killing the Captain Ultra that wielded the weapon. Two more Marines tossed fragmentation grenades around the corner, but the Captain that they were aiming for dropped a bubble shield, deflecting the blasts.

The Master Chief ran for the shield, passing through it and smashing the device that projected it with a powerful kick. Coincidentally, the destroyed bauble slammed into the Brute's throat and left him wheezing, winded. The Chief fired at the alien's skull, and ducked behind cover, chucking a spike grenade out at the Brutes. There was a large explosion, and two corpses came flying past the Chief's cover.

The Marines pressed on into the last area with two more rescued Marines in tow, and the last four Brutes opened fire. The Master Chief focused on the War Chieftain, a bronze armored colossus of a Brute, riddling the Brute with battle rifle rounds, but the shielding of the Chieftain allowed him to withstand the attacks and kill three Marines with his plasma cannon. The Arbiter moved in, his plasma fire stripping the Chieftain's shields more effectively than any human weapon could. Stacker finished the overwhelmed War Chieftain off with a full clip of AR fire, and then he jumped away as a plasma grenade adhered to one of the Marines. The doomed man sprinted for the Brute that had thrown it, and the explosion killed both of them, painting the floor red.

The Arbiter shook his head sadly as he looked at all the human corpses. "We did all we could. Let us move the survivors to the landing pad. There is a lift outside."

The Chief led the survivors outside to the lift. He found the switch, activated it and they waited for the lift to come down. But while they waited, matters got worse.

"Commander, we lost the Ops Center," said Sergeant Johnson over the COM. "Brutes attacked in force. Couldn't hold them off. We're falling back to the hangar. But don't wait for us." _

"What should I do, ma'am?" asked the pilot, Hocus over the channel.

"Hold position! I'm not leaving without him," replied Keyes firmly.

The lift arrived down below. The Chief, the Arbiter and the Marines boarded the elevator back up to the flight deck.

"Ma'am, I've got movement," cried Hocus' voice suddenly. "Above and below. Brutes! They got jump-packs!" _

"They're going after the thrusters," warned Keyes as the Master Chief, the Arbiter and the Marines emerged from the lift. "Shake them off, Lieutenant!" _

Kilo 23 took off, getting out of the Brutes reach. Noticing the Chief and the Arbiter, the Brutes attacked them. The jump packs didn't allow the Brutes to fly, but they could launch themselves out of

reach quickly. Well placed shots from the Master Chief's battle rifle took a Jump Pack Brute down, while the Arbiter's plasma fire pinned down and overwhelmed another Brute.

Stacker and the Marines took down the other two as they tried to get a bead on the Arbiter.

Four more blasted into the air, this group wielding carbines. "I will rip your head from its socket!" roared the leader of the pack.

The Chief seized a brute shot, and fired, the grenade arcing into a Brute and destroying his jump pack, sending him plummeting to his doom. The Arbiter had grabbed a carbine, and fired the rifle at another Brute, who snarled upon seeing his hated foe and returned fire. This just left him vulnerable to fire from the Marines, stripping him of his protection and slaying him.

The Chief blasted another Brute with the brute shot, threw the empty grenade launcher to the side, dived for his battle rifle, and fired at the remaining Brute. The Brute landed and charged, knocking aside the Marines like bowling pins. As he bore down on Stacker, the Arbiter grabbed him from behind and sliced through his spine with his energy sword, then hurled him to the ground and stabbed him in the chest.

Having successfully retaken the flight deck, a door at the road below opened, and Johnson approached them, holding an SMG. Seeing Johnson and his surviving squad at the doorway under attack from Drones, the Chief and the Arbiter assisted, hosing them with rapid fire.

"Drones!" yelled Johnson. "Go! I'll cover you!"

The few Drones were quickly eliminated by Johnson's cool SMG bursts.

Kilo 23 returned for the final evac. The barracks survivors and Johnson's squad boarded the Pelican dropship.

"Brutes. In the Ops Center," explained Johnson, panting. "They disarmed the bomb. Sorry Commander, there were too many. Even for me."

Keyes spoke over the COM. "_Chief, get back to the Ops Center. Kill those Brutes. Rearm the bomb. I've gotta get these men outta here. But I'll radio with another exit. Good luck." _

Johnson and the Arbiter boarded the Pelican, and the dropship lifted off.

The Master Chief headed along the road that Johnson had previously came from, passing by destroyed Warthogs and dead Marines. As the Chief reached a door at the end of the road his vision lurched again, and he felt the nausea grip him as Cortana appeared in his visor.

"You will be the protectors of Earth and all her colonies," said Cortana.

"Cortana!" called the Master Chief, but the moment had passed. He was

concerned â€" why did she continue to quote Dr Halsey's words? Words that she had told all of the Spartans.

He shook his head, and walked towards the door. He opened it, and quickly dropped a green armored Grunt Heavy manning a mounted plasma cannon with a panicked burst. He moved through to another roadway, and picked up the plasma cannon. Leaping over a downed truck, he blasted a trio of unsuspecting Jackals with the weapon, depleting half its battery resources simply to slay the creatures. The Grunt on the plasma cannon panicked, but managed to return fire.

The Chief dropped the turret and threw out a deployable cover device, projecting a barrier of energy between him and the Grunt. He waited for his shields to recharge, jumped over the cover, and unleashed the plasma cannon's fury on the Grunt. The alien fell in pools of blue blood. Tossing aside the plasma cannon, the Chief grabbed the fresh one that the Grunt had just been manning, and fired down the slope of the access, scorching a group of fleeing Grunts. He ripped the cannon free from its anti-grav base, marched around the corner, and blasted a Jackal into oblivion before ducking back to avoid the retaliation of two Grunts that _both _manned plasma cannons.

Ditching the cannon, the Chief rolled out from behind the wall and fired a quick burst at one of the Grunt Heavys, dropping it to the ground and sending the others into a panic. He ducked behind the cover of a shattered Warthog, and threw a plasma grenade as far as he could.

It bonded to the other plasma cannon, and the Grunt screamed and threw itself away â€" and the grenade detonated, hurling it to the ground and almost snapping it in two.

The Chief blasted the remaining Grunts with the plasma cannon, and then walked toward the Motor Pool. He reached the spot where he'd snipe at if he was on the upper railing â€" and threw himself away as a blue beam of energy sizzled past his skull.

* * *

><p>The Jackal Sniper clucked, and fired again, and the Demon dodged and rolled into a crouch. Purple blood suddenly drenched his shoulder as his fellow Sniper collapsed, owing to the bullet holes in his neck. The Jackal snarled and brought his beam rifle to bear but the Demon continued to weave, and opened fire, shredding the Jackal's eye.<p>

The Chief grabbed the Jackals beam rifles and headed back up the corridor behind the Ops Center. The Spartan slipped through the door, snuck in and saw a bronze armored War Chieftain with a fuel rod gun slung across his back communicating with the Prophet of Truth using the Ops Center communications.

* * *

><p>Brute War Chieftain Alcadeus stood proudly before the Prophet on the video screen. His pack had done well, as had the two Grunts under their command. Two of his Captains accompanied him, while another manned a plasma cannon on the ridge of the operations center. "We have taken their Command Center!" he said proudly to Truth.<p>

"Have you discovered how they plan to stop me?" asked Truth from the screen.

Alcadeus shifted his feet nervously. "Not just yet, Noble Prophet," he admitted sheepishly.

The Prophet of Truth didn't look happy. _"Find out what I need to know, or your place on the path is forfeit. Tell me you understand!"_ he snarled.

Alcadeus nodded. "Yes, Holy One. It shall be done."

The Prophet nodded, and disconnected from the screen.

Alcadeus shuddered at the Prophet's threat before he turned to his pack. "Have the Drones scour these machines! Find out what these heathens know about the Ark!"

As the two Grunts and Brute Captains got busy, a blue beam of energy smashed into the back of Alcadeus' head, dropping his shields. He roared in agony as another beam hit him in the back of the skull. The Brute turned and fired his fuel rod gun, and the Grunt pursuing their attacker dived out of the way, as did the attacker, in a blur of ceramic green armor.

Alcadeus growled. "Bring me the Demon's head!" he roared to his Captains.

Right after that, another blue beam of energy pierced his forehead, and darkness claimed him.

* * *

><p>The Master Chief fired two more shots from the beam rifle into a Brute Captain, felling him instantly, and he took his hand off the rifle as it overheated and ducked behind cover. A Grunt came round the corner, gripping his needler, and the Chief fired the beam rifle again, causing vaporized brain to shoot out of its ears. He readied the rifle and fired again, picking off the last Grunt.<p>

The lone Brute Captain threw a blue orb of energy, and the Chief turned and ran for the other beam rifle as the orb began to drain his shields. The Chief turned and fired, knocking the Captains helmet off, and then fired again, piercing his brain. He rose and headed for the bomb, and then ducked back behind cover as he remembered the Brute manning the plasma cannon. He leapt out, letting his shields take the attacks, and fired a single shot, killing the Brute.

"Hit the switch, Chief. Arm that bomb!" called Johnson over the COM.

The Master Chief reactivated the bomb and the base's alarm sounded. Red lights came on and klaxons blared.

_"That did it, Chief! Bomb's armed," _said Keyes over the COM.

"We got your exit," added Johnson. _"A service elevator in the hangar. Head downstairs, cut through the caves!" _

The Chief headed back into the cave filled with Drone corpses, where the Grunts were running wildly. He put the Jackal Sniper down with the last shot from his beam rifle, grabbed a battle rifle, and then sprinted through the corridors, ignoring the Grunts until one obviously psychologically unstable individual primed a plasma grenade in each hand, and then ran screaming towards the Spartan. The Chief put it down with a single burst of AR fire, but was forced to waste precious seconds waiting for the grenades to explode.

"South hangar, straight through the caves Chief," added Johnson as the Chief headed through the corridors, taking the two right turns. As he came to the left turn, his vision lurched again and another familiar wave of nausea caused him to slow down.

"There will be a great deal of hardship on the road ahead," said Cortana's voice as her image appeared in the Chief's visor. He shook his head as his vision cleared with a net of blue lines, and he continued back out to the vehicle access, where Drones, some Jackals and Grunts fled, and back down the corridors to the hangar, ignoring the terrified Covenant.

Just as he got to the hanger again, his vision lurched and went dark, "You will become the best we can make you," said Cortana's voice.

This is really not the time, Cortana, thought the Chief, struggling to move on. He was worried sick about the AI, and her condition seemed to be getting worse as she continued to try to reach out to him.

Was that what she was doing though? He decided to worry about that _after_ he was out of the base, and the Chief got to the hangar, where the Phantoms were fleeing, and the marooned Grunts ran around in panic. Some were even trying to catch the fleeing Phantoms, before sitting down and looking miserable. The Chief almost felt sorry for the doomed aliens " almost. After all, they had tried to kill him on many an occasion.

_"There isn't much time, Chief. Find that elevator," _said Johnson over the COM.

The Master Chief sprinted down the stairs to the right side of the hanger. He made it to the service elevator, and activated it. The door began to close, but it didn't fully shut. Something exploded and flames flickered through the gap. The Spartan felt the perspiration on his forehead " and the nausea in his vision as Cortana's face appeared in his visor.

"This place will become your home," she said as the Spartan clutched his head.

The elevator began to descend. The Master Chief heard a massive boom. Shaking his head to clear the nausea, he looked up and saw the flames roaring through the open door. The violent shaking disconnected the elevator from its cable and sent it plummeting down into the depths of the earth.

Then it crashed and the Chief blacked out, hearing the voice of Cortana one last time.

"This place will become your tomb."

****Far out. Talk about a flippin' nightmare. This novelisation would have been impossible if I didn't have this game. ****

****As you can see, I included the Rooster Teeth Easter egg, which is one of the cooler things that has been done in a Halo game; things which I think are just awesome.****

****The Heroic version of the conversation is my favourite, so I included that rather than the Legendary one. I did make reference to all of them, however, and I enjoyed doing so " even if the Master Chief probably could have ripped the door off its hinges by himself.****

****Tell me if you think that the combat is getting repetitive, and if you think that I'm skimming over it. That was a bit of a problem in The Flood, and I think that it might be happening in this fic. It'll be easier to provide variety with all the different weapons in this game, fortunately. I'll try and spice things up as much as possible, I promise. I'm also going to name a lot of Brutes to make the fight against them seem more personal. I'll invent a few names, but I'll also use some of Brutes whose fates are undisclosed in the official Halo media.****

****Yes, I rambled a bit as well, I just wanted to get to at least 8000 words for this chapter. Please don't judge me.****

****Please rate and review!****

4. Tsavo Highway

****Halo: The Installation****

****And, we're back, to the fourth level of this novelisation. Let's see how much I know about what I'm doing, shall we? In this level, I'm going to attempt to use the Marines far more then I have been, as the fact remains, their survival and that of the Chief would have depended on their teamwork.****

****God I love this game. And Halo 4. That was flippin' amazing.****

Tsavo Highway.

The Master Chief groaned silently as he started to wake up, shaking his head to clear the foginess in his mind.

"What happened?" asked the voice of Gunnery Sergeant Reynolds groggily.

The Master Chief came to in the wreckage of the crashed elevator, with wounded Marines being treated and the other Marines trying to regroup. The Chief got to his feet and looked up the elevator shaft above to see that the shaft was engulfed in flames.

"Chief, please respond," came Commander Keyes' voice over the COM, though the signal was weak and filled with static. "What's your status over? If you can hear me, find transport. Head for the town of

Voi." _

"Ah! I've got a broken rib," yelled one of the wounded Marines, clutching his side in agony as he leaned against a crate.

"Hey. You wanna bleed out?" snapped the Corpsman tending to his injuries.

"No..." said the wounded Marine a little ashamedly.

"Then I've gotta keep pressure on the wound," replied the Corpsman, tapping information into a data pad.

"I think I broke something!" coughed one of the other wounded Marines weakly from beside the weapons rack.

On the other side of the underground vehicle maintenance bay, Reynolds ran up at the other side of the elevator wreckage and began to handle the situation. He sprinted up to the gate, coughed loudly, and fired a battle rifle burst at a security camera to prevent any remaining Covenant forces from finding the squad of Marines. "Settle down, Marines!" he called loudly, turning back to them. "Somebody hit the emergency power," he added, coughing.

"On it, Sergeant," replied a Marine, heading for the generators.

The other Marines began to bombard Reynolds with questions.

"Another bombing run?"

"Did we get everyone out, sir?"

"You think the Brutes know where we are?"

"Any word from Charlie-Two? We got separated."

"Nah, man. Alpha-Six. They're all gone too," replied a Marine regretfully.

"The swelling could be a fracture," explained the Corpsman to another wounded Marine. "You think you can stand?"

The Marine gingerly felt his ankle. "I don't know, doc," he replied.

"If you can walk, set your boots on the line," ordered Reynolds.

The Master Chief and the Marines fit for duty formed up on the other side of the maintenance bay. Two of the Warthogs had been totalled, but another two Warthogs were still parked and functional.

"What's our situation, Sergeant?" asked a Marine, her voice lacking any apprehension.

"Not sure, can't reach the Commander, too far underground," replied Reynolds quickly.

The Master Chief looked the Warthogs over, walked over to the slightly worse one, and then jumped in the Warthogs driving seat.

Reynolds flashed a tired grin. "Chief's got the right idea. Let's mount up, get the hell outta these caves."

"Yes sir!" chorused the Marines.

Reynolds leaped into the back of the second 'Hog, a troop transport variation, a Marine toting a battle rifle jumped into the shotgun seat, while a third leapt into the driver's seat, and started up the transport.

Another battle rifle armed Marine hoisted herself into the Chief's 'Hog, while the next stowed his shotgun and took the turret.

"I'll get the door, sir," called a Marine to the Master Chief, hurrying over to the door controls.

The Marine opened the door, hopped into the back of the Warthog with Reynolds, and the two Warthogs proceeded down the tunnel.

"Second Squad?"_ called Reynolds over the COM. _"We're coming through!"_

The Warthogs came upon small Covenant resistance at the gate leading out of the caves, a Grunt and three Jackals just as Reynolds finished speaking

"Don't leave any of 'em standing!" yelled Reynolds, before shouting down at his driver. "Conserve ammo. Run 'em over!"

"Look at the little bastards run!" remarked Reynolds' driver as he pursued a pair of fleeing Jackals. "Surprise, crap-face!" he crowed as he rolled the aliens under the tires.

The Chief's Warthog burst into the sunlight, and while the Marines winced a little, the Chief showed no discomfort as his helmet's lenses automatically polarized to adjust to the glare.

He turned around a rock, observing the wrecked Phantom, and ran right into a trio of Grunts, splattering their blue blood over the ground. The gunner yelled in shock and opened fire on the remaining two, leaving just the Brute Captain that had commanded them.

This, as the Chief knew perfectly well, was no small danger, even in a Warthog.

The Brute fired his massive brute shot, and the grenade blasted the 'Hog into the air. The Chief felt sick to his stomach as they sailed through the air, while he'd survive the impact, if the Warthog landed upside down, the Marines beside him would break their necks in the impact.

Fortunately, not only did the Warthog land tires down, but by then Reynolds' Warthog had zoomed into the sunlight and crushed the Brute's back into his chest as the Brute followed the Chief.

Having taken out the fleeing Lance the Chief observed the massive wreckage from a gigantic human structure, along with a crashed Phantom. The Chief found a cliff and pulled up, looking over the edge to see a long line of the twisted wreckage.

"The Mombasa Space Elevator," whispered the Marine seated beside the Chief, horror in her voice.

"It collapsed when the city got glassed," said the other driver.

"But the tower was thousands of kilometres high!" protested the first Marine.

"Yeah?" replied the driver coolly. "Well now it's scattered all over the Savannah."

"Holy crap..." whispered the astonished Marine.

The Chief, meanwhile, was listening to a radio transmission from the wreckage of a crashed Phantom.

"Chieftains! Rally your packs!"_ roared the Brute Commander furiously.

The Chief moved the Warthog down the cliff and headed up the hill. He saw a gravity lift suspending a sniper nest, but his Warthog flattened the two Jackal Snipers before they could make their way towards it. Purple blood splattered the winch of the Warthog as the vehicle rolled over their bodies.

The voice of the Brute Commander rasped out of the small post's COM system. "_Kill all survivors, let none near the crater!"_ he snarled to the Covenant, unaware that his orders were being overheard.

"_The crater?_", thought the Master Chief. "_They really have been digging._"

Leaving the dead Jackals, the two Warthogs proceeded on, passing more wreckage from both sides. The Master Chief caught another transmission from the Brute Commander as the Warthogs rounded a corner leading into an alleyway in the rock.

"_The Prophet will soon complete his blessed task!"_ he snarled.

Before the Chief could make a silent vow that the Prophet wouldn't complete that task, Reynolds' voice crackled in his ears. "_Chief, still can't get the Commander,"_ called Reynolds over the COM. "_COMs are a mess, Pelicans are scattered. Best thing now, get some distance between us and the base. Brutes are gonna be looking for survivors."_

—

Just as he finished speaking, the Warthogs reached another crashed Phantom and the gunners opened fire on the Covenant troops around it. Three Grunts went down in splatters of blue blood, while Sergeant Reynolds' Warthog flattened a pair of Jackals as Reynolds himself took out a Grunt clambering on top of a crate to get a better aim with his needler.

The Master Chief carefully swerved his 'Hog, and the Marine beside him opened fire, pumping six bullets from her BR55HB into the Brute Major as the alien tried to bring his brute shot to bear. The Brute roared as the bullets stripped him of his armour, and fired his

weapon at the Warthog.

Time seemed to slow as the Chief floored the accelerator, and the Warthog raced away from the grenade, though the force of the blast had the Warthog teetering on its front wheels for a few seconds. This gave the Chief's gunner ample time to pump the Brute full of bullets, splattering red-blue blood on the ground and killing the wounded Covenant trooper.

Suddenly, a Brute voice rippled through the Chief's ears, startling the Spartan, but it was only the Brute Army Commander talking across the battlenet.

"I see it, pack brothers! The Holy Relic! What fools, to live so long on hallow ground! Never know what lay beneath the surface,"_ he said with relish.

* * *

><p>The Warthogs kept pressing on, encountering a Phantom and its many troops in a shallow pool blocked by a dam. The Phantom left and it didn't take long before the Warthogs overpowered the infantry. The Grunts all fell within a few seconds of turret fire, while the Marines in shotgun took down the Brutes with battle rifle bursts.<p>

The Shade and Jackal Snipers posed more of a problem, and the Master Chief was forced to carefully manoeuvre the Warthog so that the gunners could take down the Jackals atop their sniper nests. Fortunately, the glowing sights of the Jackals presented easy targets for the Chief's gunner, and both aliens toppled after a few shots from the Warthogs turrets.

Dodging the fire of the Shade, the Chief kept the Warthog in a position where the gunners could destroy the turret, and watched as first the Grunt, and then the Shade rolled off the dam. The Chief angled the Warthog for the edge of the dam, and then leapt out, heading for the sniper nest and grabbing a beam rifle, tossing it to the Marine that had been sitting beside him.

She grinned, and nodded in thanks before giving a cry of "OO-RAH!"

As the Chief hopped back into the 'Hog and steered it around the dam (slaying a Brute Captain Major under the wheels, the worried voice of Gunnery Sergeant Marcus Pete Stacker cut across the comm. "_I repeat: My convoy's been hit. I've got wounded-(static). We're on the Tsavo Highway about-(static)-east of Voi. Someone, anyone, please, respond! (-static)." _The transmission cut out.

"Tsavo Highway is just ahead, Chief," called the Chief's gunner wearily.

The Warthogs arrived at the Highway, encountering Brute Choppers, silver armoured vehicles that looked like large wheels with a cockpit soldered onto the back, as well as several infantry hostiles, mainly Grunts and Brutes. One Chopper rammed and destroyed a fully manned attacking Warthog, followed by another Chopper.

Taking note of the two buildings where a few Marines, including

Stacker, were holding out, the Chief rammed a Brute Major, caving in his chest cavity. An Ultra brought his carbine to bear on the Warthog, but the Marine sitting beside the Chief fired the beam rifle the Spartan had given her, and the Brute dropped to the ground with a hole in its forehead.

A Chopper thundered past the Chief's Warthog, missing them by inches. The Chief's gunner pumped shell from the Vulcan turret into the back of the vehicle, and a turquoise armoured corpse soon dropped out, leaving the Chopper to sail and flip into the rock wall.

That broke the waves of the Covenant, and the Grunts cried out in terror, fleeing past the houses and left towards a tunnel. The Chief turned to the right as he dodged another Chopper, and turned the 'Hog towards the edge of the drop.

"Whatever happens, don't jump out unless I tell you," he said to his passengers.

The Spartan floored the accelerator, and the Warthog leapt towards the drop. The Marines clutched onto whatever they could find as they proceeded towards the drop " and the Chief swung the wheel, turning the 'Hog to the right and braking hard.

The Brute Ultra piloting the Chopper laughed and moved to ram the 'Hog, but the Chief had already stepped on the throttle, and the Warthog sped out of the way. The Brute's expression turned to horror as the Chopper sailed over the drop, and his screams continued to echo until a wed thud echoed from up edge, followed by an explosion.

The Chief's passenger fired the beam rifle at a Brute that had jumped out from behind cover to unload its spiker at the Chief. The blue beam of energy was sufficient enough to ensure that the Brute wasn't going to get back up again.

With the rest of the Covenant taken out (including some Brutes hiding behind some containers), the Chief dismounted the Warthog and headed into the small checkpoint where Sergeant Stacker was located.

Stacker gave him a tired smile. "We were en route to Voi Chief," he explained, reloading his assault rifle. "Banshees jumped us; started strafing... pretty much ruined our day."

The Chief nodded, and turned to the tunnels " the Warthogs journey forward into the tunnels was blocked off by a barrier.

A massive swarm of Drones flew out of the tunnel, and opened fire on the Marines. Plasma bolts sizzled through the air, accompanied by a few pink shards of crystal.

The Marines returned fire, but the continuous barrage of the Drones weapons slew the Master Chief's gunner before the Chief could get back to the vehicle. The Marine fell limply to the ground, a surprised look still etched on his face.

"Ditch the 'Hog!" shouted the Chief to the female Marine still in the shotgun seat.

She was only too happy to agree, diving behind cover just in time to dodge a barrage of needler fire.

The Master Chief ducked behind a barrier and reloaded his assault rifle. Then he pointed the weapon out and fired a quick burst, but was only able to shoot off a Drone's leg before the hail of plasma bolts became too thick to safely withstand.

As he ducked behind cover again, he caught a glimpse of a gravity lift leading to a sniping platform. He risked a peek again, and ducked back as plasma fire scorched the metal of the barrier. But he'd seen what he needed to see – the body of a green armoured Grunt Heavy.

The Chief threw a fragmentation grenade at the swarm, and ran out as the insectoid aliens swerved away from the grenade. By then, the Master Chief had leaped into the gravity lift, and ducked behind the cover of the sniping platform. Holstering his weapon, the Master Chief scavenged a plasma grenade, primed it and threw it, catching one of the Drones as it manoeuvred to put a needler round through the Chief's skull. The Drone buzzed around in a panic, before the grenade detonated. The other Drones fled from their doomed ally.

This gave the Master Chief the time to leap behind the Grunt Heavy's plasma cannon, and open fire on the Drones. Though not as powerful as a Shade turret, the waves of plasma slashed through the Drones like a hot knife through butter. Any Drones that escaped the slaughter were quickly put down by the Marines, now unburdened from the onslaught.

Finally, the last of the Drones hit the ground in a heap, and the Chief leapt down from the platform onto the fallen trailer, scooping up a fallen Brute's spiker.

Stacker had leaped up onto the Chief's Warthog and taken command of the turret. He looked sadly around the area and the Master Chief followed his gaze, taking in the smashed supply trucks, and corpses of humans and Covenant like.

"Marines in Voi really needed my supplies, Chief," said Stacker after a while. He gave a tired smile. "But I'm pretty sure they'll be plenty happy to see you."

The Chief walked over to the barrier and waited for a while for the barrier to fall.

"Take down that barrier, Chief," said Stacker, combing the area with the Warthog turret. "Power supply should be inside the tunnel."

The Chief frowned – and then, just as Stacker spoke again, realized what the barrier did.

"Chief, the barrier only works against vehicles," explained Stacker. "You should be able to walk right through."

The Chief shrugged, walked through the shield, and quickly fired at a straggling Drone, dropping the insectoid with a barrage of metal spikes. He turned to the barrier and destroyed its power source by smashing the blades of the spiker against the piece of equipment. Then he turned to another piece of equipment – a holographic

projector projecting an image of the Prophet of Truth.

"The gods will not begrudge our excavation," said the hologram of the High Prophet, obviously giving a sermon to his troops. _"By uncovering this relic, we add homage to their glory. When the dust settles, we will all see what I already know: here lies the Path, the start of our Great Journey."_

The Great Journey, thought the Master Chief, clenching his fists around the spiker. _Not if we can bury you in the grave you're digging for yourself. _He forced himself to calm down " he had to process his emotions tactically " if there wasn't time to think about something, he wouldn't.

He returned to his Warthog, and hopped in beside the female Marine, starting up the engine, and the Warthogs continued along the Tsavo Highway through the tunnel. When they emerged and reached a bridge, a CCS-class Battlecruiser soared ahead.

"Commander," said a voice over the comm. _"This is ONI Recon One-Eleven. The cruisers above-(static). They found-(static)"

-

"Say again, Recon?" replied Keyes over the comm. _"You're breaking up."_

_"There's something in the crater, Ma'am," _replied ONI Recon 111. _"Something beneath the storm."_

Something beneath the storm? It sounded strange to the Master Chief, but now the Brute Commander's words that the Chief had heard made perfect sense.

The Warthogs reached a gap in the bridge. There was no way that they could continue on the Warthogs, so the Marines dismounted. The Master Chief clambered across the broken metal support beams and bars of the bridge and continued on foot.

Stacker, Reynolds and the Marines followed the Spartan across the broken bridge, weapons at the ready.

_"Master Chief?" _asked the voice of Commander Keyes over the COM as the Chief reached a small base.

"Reporting," replied the Spartan.

"Finally, a good connection," sighed Keyes. _"Truth has excavated a Forerunner Artefact; we have to assume it's the Ark." _

"Keep pushing to the town of Voi, Chief," added the voice of Sergeant Johnson. _"Resupply birds will meet you in the next valley."

-

"Understood," said the Chief, before hefting the spiker.

The Chief found more Marines pinned down and under heavy fire from Brutes and their allies. The Chief and the Marines eventually clear the sector.

"We've got reinforcements, Marines!" yelled a broad shouldered woman

loudly.

"Woohoo!" laughed a Marine, throwing his arms up in the air.
"Yeah!"

"Booyeah!" chimed in his comrade, firing at a Jackal and dropping the alien.

"Ohhhh-yee-HAH!" added another, throwing a frag grenade at a knot of Grunts. The panicked aliens leapt aside, but the explosion of shrapnel shredded their methane tanks, and the escaping gas propelled them comically all around the battlefield.

The Chief levelled the spiker and opened fire, the white-hot spikes pouring out of the weapon and embedding themselves in the Brutes tough hides. The Brutes screamed in pain, and one Minor fell to the floor, already overwhelmed, before a stolen spike grenade finished him off. Even had he survived, for this act of cowardice, the Brute was doomed.

Two more Brute corpses soon joined him, slain by the spike grenade.

The Grunts were all dead now, but a Captain Major was still putting up a good fight. Three Marine corpses lay around him, and he was firing his brute shot wildly.

The Chief put a stop to that with the last clip of the spiker, pouring spikes into the alien faster than it could close the distance between them.

No sooner had the Marines regrouped up at the ammo building, then a Phantom approached with reinforcements, and Brutes poured out of the transport as it offered cover fire for the Covenant.

The broad shouldered woman from earlier approached the Chief, nursing a battle rifle. "Sir, Recon spotted Covenant armour ahead," she said. "Pelicans are inbound with heavy weapons; we need to hold out 'till they arrive."

"Name, Marine?" asked the Master Chief, after nodding at her statement. He grabbed a fallen battle rifle, and started scavenging the other rifles for ammunition.

The Marine looked surprised. "Lieutenant Kellen, sir!"

The Chief nodded. "Lieutenant Kellen, we need to get all these Marines under cover, and all of them need weapons with range. Battle rifles, sniper rifles, even carbines and beam rifles if necessary. If we can take out the Brutes before they get within range, we can save a lot of lives today." The Chief grabbed a sniper rifle, switching it for the assault rifle.

Brute roars echoed from down the hill, and a Minor recklessly charged in.

The Chief took him out almost casually, splattering his brains with a bullet from the sniper rifle.

Then the Marines organized themselves, taking down two Majors before

the Brute's leader showed up â€" a War Chieftain holding a fuel rod gun.

"Get out of there!" ordered the Chief.

Stacker and Reynolds barked the same thing, although less polite. Despite their best efforts, two of the Marines lost their lives to the fuel rod gun blast, and several others cried out and shielded themselves from the blast. Three Jump Pack Brutes boosted onto the cliff, and began harassing the Marines with carbine fire.

Stacker fired his assault rifle at them. "Form up on the Chief!" he roared. "Take 'em down, Marines!"

A bullet from the Chief's SRS99 took care of one of the Jump Pack Brutes. One of the remaining one boosted away in a panic, leaving the Chief to take care of him, but the Brute still managed to put another carbine round through a Marine's shoulder.

The Marine screamed, and fell to the ground, clutching his shoulder in agony.

The Chief brained the Brute with a sniper round, and dragged the Marine behind cover. The Marine struggled up. "Don't bother, sir," he choked bravely. "We don't have treatment for these rounds." He slipped off his dog tags and handed them to the Chief. "I'm dead in a few minutes," he said, shaking violently. "The toxins in those rounds are in my system. Always did know my stuff about their weapons." The Marine stood up, and pulled out two frag grenades.

Before the Chief could stop the Marine, he'd sprinted out onto the battlefield. As he reached the three remaining Brutes, the War Chieftain, a Captain, and a Captain Major, he pulled the pins on the grenades with a cry of "Enjoy your stay in hell!"

The grenades detonated, consuming both the doomed Marine and the Captain, and stripping the Captain Major of his armour.

The Chief threw another frag and finished him off, vowing not to let his sacrifice be in vain. He then turned to the last Jump Pack Brute, boosting through the air, and fired at just the right moment with the sniper rifle. The Brute's armour shattered and he screamed as he toppled to the ground, impaling himself on a broken shard of metal.

That left only the War Chieftain, and his fuel rod gun meant that this would be a difficult task.

Stacker and Reynolds coordinated the attack. First, the Chief emptied the sniper rounds into the Brute's shields, and then switched to the assault rifle. The Brute's shields broke, and his armour began to crack. He roared, and charged up the small hill, but the fire eventually got to him, and he slowed and collapsed.

"Wraith! Get to cover!" yelled a Marine as a Wraith from further up the trail arrived, interrupting their relief.

The Chief, lacking heavy weapons or ammo for heavy weapons considered his options and he knew that he had to board the Wraith and neutralize it.

He sprinted up the trail as the Wraith unloaded plasma fire at him from its turret, fired his battle rifle, and splattered the Brute Major gunner's brains inside his helmet. Without the gunner unloading the plasma turret at him, it was a simple matter to leap onto the Wraith, and shove a plasma grenade into the cockpit, directly onto the Brute Ultra driver.

The Brute screamed in terror as the Master Chief leapt off the Wraith and the tank exploded as the Spartan dived for cover.

"Good work Master Chief!" called Stacker.

"Watch it now, Pelicans coming in!" yelled Sergeant Johnson over the COM. _"Brutes have plenty of armour between here and Voi Chief, but this Warthog should help you punch on through."_

Seconds later, a Pelican zoomed over the hill, a Warthog attached to the back. It hovered over the trail for a few seconds, and then disengaged the 'Hog, which hit the ground and bounced on its tyres.

"Thank you, Sergeant," said the Chief over the comm, hoisting himself into the Warthog. Kellen took the turret, and another Marine carrying an SMG jumped into the seat beside the Chief. Stacker and Reynolds boarded the other 'Hog that was still intact. The Marines unable to join them boarded the Pelican, the Chief started up the 'Hog, and drove down the trail, as the tunnel onward on the Tsavo Highway was closed off.

The Spartan quickly found a short tunnel around back onto the Tsavo Highway, and couldn't help but think that he would have found the tunnels and mapped out the place sooner had Cortana been with him.

The Warthogs cruised through the tunnel with no resistance, but obstructing the way at the end were some Choppers and a Wraith patrolling.

Kellen opened fire on the back of the Wraith, shattering its power cells. Reynolds joined in from the turret of the other Warthog, and soon there was a massive explosion that sent one of the bewildered Choppers spinning out of control, throwing the Minor that piloted it from the seat. He landed hard, but was finished off by Vulcan bullets before he could get back up.

The other Chopper returned fire with its autocannons, and trapped in the caves as they were, the Warthogs couldn't dodge. The only option was for the gunners to aim at the cannons in an attempt to shoot them off, but the Brute machine just kept dodging, leaving the Warthogs in very bad shape.

The Chief made his decision, leapt out of the 'Hog, and threw a plasma grenade. The Chopper dodged " and a spike grenade that the Chief had tossed smacked into its wheel. The wheels tore the grenade to shreds " and the subsequent explosion tore the Chopper apart.

The Chief jumped out of the tunnel, and cast his eyes over the littered Covenant vehicles, but the Wraith and one of the Choppers

were little more than twisted metal, and the other Chopper had been snapped in half when it struck the cliff wall.

"Wraith, Master Chief, circling that hill!" called a Marine. "Brute Choppers too, so watch your back!"

Nearly a dozen more Choppers, a few Wraiths and Shade Turrets defended the route back onto the highway. Despite being greatly outnumbered and outgunned, the Chief and the Marines knew they had to clear the zone.

Fortunately, the Covenant hadn't seen the Marines yet, despite the massive explosions, and the Chief waved for them to get back. The road had split again, with a short jump that the Warthogs could make easily make. The Spartan crouched on the concrete, and was quickly joined by the two Sergeants.

"One of the 'Hog's isn't going to last much longer," admitted Reynolds.

"We're gonna have to commandeer some Choppers, then hit the Wraiths with everything that we've got," said Stacker. "Chief, we need to take out the Shade turrets first, but first we need to get some of those Choppers off our case."

"Get the 'Hog's ready," said the Master Chief, nodding.

The Spartan leapt over the jump, grabbing the concrete edge and hoisting himself up.

They still hadn't seen him, and one of the Choppers had passed under him. The Chief leapt off and grabbed onto the back of the Chopper, and then swung himself around, kicking the Brute Ultra out of the vehicle with both feet, and taking the controls. He swung back towards the Covenant and opened fire on the Brute, destroying his armour and shredding his flesh.

Two more Choppers shot madly over the rise towards the Chief. One of them fell into pieces from fire from the Master Chief's Chopper, and the Chief turned as soon as the Covenant vehicle had fragmented, only just dodging the second Chopper as it attempted to ram the Chief's vehicle.

The Chopper wheeled around and pursued the Chief, opening fire with its autocannons. The Spartan struggled to wheel the Chopper away, and zoomed around the rock, blasted a Chopper, sending it flying and slaying the driver, and headed back to where he'd been.

The fire from the Chopper suddenly ceased under the heavy thud of Vulcan turrets as the Warthogs thundered over the rise. The bullet-ridden Brute Ultra toppled out of the Chopper, and Sergeant Reynolds took the controls.

"Private!" barked Stacker from the turret of one of the Warthogs to a battle rifle toting Private. "Take out the first Shade turret, and get that sucker off our backs! We'll draw their fire, you take out the operator!"

"Yes sir!" replied the Marine.

The two Warthogs and the two Choppers headed around the corner, and opened fire on a Chopper careening towards them, destroying the machine and splattering the Brute pilot's corpse against the rock.

The Shade turret, manned by a Grunt Heavy, turned and fired, blue streaks of plasma slashing through the air towards the Marines vehicles.

The more badly damaged Warthog skidded to a halt, its driver already leaping out as the plasma blackened the LRV, before fire erupted out of it.

The Grunt turned the Shade back to the Choppers and the other Warthog, but hesitated. He didn't want to hit the Brutes accidentally and be executed for his mistakes!

He was spared this worry when the three battle rifle rounds punctured his exoskeleton and took his head off his shoulders in an explosion of thick blue blood.

Down below, the Master Chief's Chopper bounced as he dodged another plasma mortar from the Wraiths. He kept up the fire on the massive tank, and the Brute gunner eventually fell from the turret with a choked cry.

Two more Choppers tumbled over the overpass, but Reynolds took one out coolly, firing at the pilot with the autocannons of the Chopper. The other Chopper got tangled up in the wreckage, and headed for Reynolds. Reynolds gunned the engine, and moved out of the way of a massive plasma bomb from one of the Wraiths up on the hill, which impacted with the pursuing Chopper.

The Warthog took over, firing at the joins in the Wraith's heavy armour. Arcs of plasma energy began to sizzle over the Wraith's skin, and it fired wildly one last time, missing completely. Then it exploded in a brilliant flash of pink light.

The Chief turned to the other Shade turret, but the Marine sniper had already taken out the operator with his battle rifle. The Chief turned up the hill and gunned the engine of the Chopper, roaring up the hill and scything through the side of one of the remaining Wraith's pontoons. The Wraiths turned, but they were too slow to catch up with the Spartan's Chopper as he headed down the bridge, and they'd just opened their power sources up to the other Chopper and the Vulcan turret of the Warthog. The Chief heard another explosion, and looped around tightly to pelt the final Wraith with autocannon fire. The Wraith slowed as the projectiles punched their way into the tank, and the pilot, unseen, slumped onto the controls.

The Chief took a look at the massive storm over the vast crater beyond the cliff as the Wraith headed for the edge and crashed several meters down.

"Look at the size of that thing! Wonder how old it is?" asked a Marine in awe.

"Don't know. But I do know that ain't a normal storm," said Lieutenant Kellen looking warily at the storm.

The Chief didn't partake in the conversation; he just observed the cruisers over the crater.

"Commander, I can see most of it now," said the voice of ONI Recon 111. "Readings are all over the EM spectrum." _

"Roger that, Recon," replied Commander Keyes over the COM. "Shut off your gear, fall back. I'll monitor from Kilo 23." _

The Master Chief moved the Chopper into motion, and continued down the highway, and took in the view of the hologram of the Prophet of Truth, hovering above its projector as they continued along the Highway.

Sergeant Johnson's voice crackled over the COM. "Chief, the gate to Voi is dead ahead. Smash the Brute blockade, open her up!" _

"Yes sir," replied the Spartan. The Chief cast his eyes over the hologram of the Prophet of Truth.

"My Dreadnought, the vessel that has so long been the focus of our worship, now rests on its true pedestal," said the Prophet's hologram. "Even now, its engines spark greater ones below, relics long without power, yet ready to fulfil their divine purpose. Stand fast! Keep our enemies at bay! Soon, my brothers, we will all have our reward!" The hologram flickered, and died.

"Your reward will not come to pass, Prophet," warned the Chief in his thoughts. "That I promise you."

"The Demon must not pass!" bellowed the voice of a Brute Captain, snapping the Chief back to reality. Two Jump Pack Brutes, carbines whining, boosted over several scattered stone barriers, only to meet the fire of the stolen Choppers. First their armour, then their jump packs, and finally their spines shattered under the fire from the Chief and Sergeant Reynolds.

The Master Chief dismounted and picked his way through the barriers. He dodged behind the crashed Pelican, and engaged the Covenant on foot. The heavy defences were commanded by the Brutes, led by a bronze armoured War Chieftain.

The Chief took careful aim at a Shade turret that was firing at the other end of the Pelican. A Marine passed him a battle rifle, and the Chief nodded his thanks, before dropping the Grunt Heavy operating the turret with a single burst, destroying his methane tank, and causing his body to blast out of the side of the Shade with a stream of methane propelling him.

The Brutes wheeled around and fired. The Chief passed the battle rifle back to the Marine, and dodged behind cover, spikes and plasma bolts whistling past his hiding place. He risked jumping out to throw a well placed spike grenade, connecting squarely with a Captain. As he ducked back into the Pelican, he heard an explosion of flame and a heavy thud.

The barrage lessened, and the Chief dodged out again, and fired on a Major as he struggled to bring his plasma rifle to bear on the Spartan. The Major's armour cracked, and he dived away from the Chief's shots.

A Jump Pack Brute blasted himself into the air, opening fire with his carbine. The Master Chief returned fire with the MA5C, shattering his jump pack. A few minutes later, there was a wet thud as the Brute hit the ground. The Chief finished him off with several AR rounds, and then turned back to the Major as he charged out of hiding, berserk. He held his ground and fired the assault rifle into the alien's face until the Brute stumbled and fell in a pool on blue spotted red blood.

Two Brute Minors charged around the corner recklessly and fell quickly to shotgun blasts from a concealed Marine. The Chief grabbed their spike grenades, and charged for the tunnel, seeing no enemies the only thing left standing between the UNSC and Voi was another Shield Barrier in the tunnel.

The Master Chief walked towards the barriers that blocked off the tunnel, jumped over one and then jumped back, avoiding the plasma fire from the plasma cannon that the War Chieftain wielded.

He crouched behind the barrier as the continuous wave of plasma slashed through the air over his head. The Marines tried to head out from behind the cover, but the Chief waved them back there was nothing that could be done.

Nothing except toss two spike grenades over the back of the cover, and wait for them to detonate.

The plasma fire lessened and wavered, and the Chief jumped over the barrier, firing the assault rifle. He grabbed the cannon and wrenched it from the Brutes weakened grip, but the Brute backhanded him viciously, causing the Chief to drop the assault rifle.

Both combatants looked at each other for a few seconds.

"I shall claim great honour, by destroying you!" snarled the War Chieftain.

The Chief charged, lashing out with a punch that shook the Brutes head and caused his shields to spark. The Brute swung both arms upwards, knocking the Spartan back, and then brought his fists down, narrowly missing the Chief, who had managed to dodge the blow.

The War Chieftain smiled. "A fine hit. You shall not land another," he said. He charged, tackling the Master Chief into a container, and held him up.

"Die," growled the War Chieftain.

The Chief struggled as the Brute's grip tightened. Even with his armour, the Brute was strangling him. The experience brought him back to when he'd fought the Brutes on the Unyielding Hierophant, and a fully unarmed Brute had nearly killed him. It wasn't something the Chief wanting to repeat.

Then bullets began to pelt the War Chieftain's shields. The Brute snarled, and threw the Chief to the ground, charging at the Marines. He lashed out, and buckled under a shotgun blast.

The Master Chief shook his head, and dived for the Brute, wrapping

him in a headlock. The Brute tried to shake the Spartan off, but the Chief wasn't letting go. More bullets pelted the Brute, and his shields dropped. The War Chieftain gave a gargled roar as the bullets slowed him down, and he swayed and fell, the Chief jumping away before he could be crushed by the Brutes body.

Picking himself up, the Chief grabbed his assault rifle, charged into the tunnel and smashed the butt of the MA5C into the power source, destroying it with ease.

A group of Pelicans, including Kilo 23, arrived and dropped Warthogs and Marines; Commander Keyes was piloting one of them.

"Lord Hood? We made it," called Keyes.

"Music to my ears, Commander," replied Hood in relief over the videoscreen in the Pelicans cockpit, before getting down to business. _"What about the Ark?"_

"Fully uncovered, sir," admitted Keyes grimly as a Covenant Assault Carrier passed overhead

"Then we don't have much time," said Hood, before addressing all of the Marines â€" and the Master Chief. _"Marines? The Prophet of Truth doesn't know it yet, but he's about to get kicked right off his throne."_

As Hood continued to speak, the Master Chief looked grimly at the excavated Ark in the remains of what had been New Mombasa.

"We will take our city back," continued Hood with conviction. _"And drive our enemy into the grave they've been so happily digging. One final effort is all that remains."_

The Pelicans lifted up and flew off. Turning away from the Covenant troops, the Master Chief drew his MA5C and walked to one of the Warthogs â€" to retake Voi from the Covenant.

**Sheesh. Talk about a nightmare. And that won't even be as bad as the next chapter. I'll probably split that level into two, because I can, and I want to focus on the Arbiter for a bit. That guy is awesome. **

But I **_still**_**think that the combat might be getting repetitive.**

I've run out of things to say, so have a good Christmas all, and please rate and review!

5. The Storm

Halo: The Installation

I'm splitting this level in two, because I want to focus mainly on the Arbiter for the next bit, as he needs his moments in the sun. So that part might be a bit confusing. I need the practice though, as I'll be doing the second tower â€" the one that the Elites focus on for The Covenant.

****With a mainly organized routine going on here, this chapter should be a lot better in terms of combat, and I want to avoid any combat skimming and make this more emotional if I can. I'm not sure if I'll be able to pull it off, but I'll definitely try.****

****Happy New Year everybody! (I'm from New Zealand, we're ahead in terms of time, just in case anyone was wondering.)****

The Storm

A convoy of three Warthogs: two M831 TT Warthogs and one M12 Warthog LRV, rolled down a tunnel of Tsavo Highway, with the Master Chief riding shotgun in the LRV.

Commander Keyes briefed him as they moved. _"Chief, the Prophet of Truth has found the Ark. Our only chance of stopping him is a surprise aerial assault. Clear this sector of Covenant anti-air defenses. Make a hole for the Admiral's ships. Good hunting. Keyes out."_

"Yes Commander," replied the Master Chief.

The Warthogs emerged from the tunnel in a parking lot scattered with destroyed Warthog chassis and Marine and Grunt corpses. The stench of burned flesh was thick in the air, and even the Chief's helmet filters didn't completely block it. The Marines had faces twisted by the smell.

The Warthogs rolled to a halt as the Marines and Master Chief dismounted, and the Marines formed a perimeter outside the locked door, and as the Chief scavenged another magnum from the ground he also snagged the Private's dog tags, stowing them in a compartment in his armor.

"Ready when you are, Chief," called Sergeant Stacker. "Open the door, take point; we'll cover you with the .50!"

The Master Chief nodded and opened the door into an empty factory section. He could hear the Prophet of Truth giving a sermon, and he headed up the stairs and along the walkways. He crouched, both magnums at the ready, and listened for a while to the Prophet's sermon, signaling to the Marines to keep quiet so that the Grunts and the Jackals didn't hear them.

"With my gentle encouragement, our Lords' holy relic springs to life," declared the Prophet's hologram. _"It is unfortunate that our enemies also bear witness to its glory. But soon their dull eyes will be closed; seared by the Rings' unforgiving might."_

The Chief frowned. He didn't know whether Truth knew what the activation of the Halo Installations would do or not, whether he still believed in the 'Great Journey' or not. Whatever the case, the Prophet was clearly deluded if he wanted to activate the Halo Array.

So instead of worrying about things like that, the Spartan opened fire on the Covenant, and four Grunts went down before they could cry out in shock, blue blood staining the floor. The Jackals quickly fled up the stairs, shields angled to prevent the Chief from taking them down. They rounded the corner, and walked right into a barrage of AR

fire from the two Marines beside the Master Chief. As soon as they were off balance, the Chief fired the magnums, and they fell in splatters of purple blood.

"Chief, open the door; we can roll on through!" called Sergeant Stacker over the COM.

The Chief headed downstairs, found the door control and hit the switch, opening a set of doors leading to a factory tunnel full of Brutes, Jackals, Grunts, and a pair of Ghosts.

The Chief emptied his magnum clips into a Brute Minor, slicing through his armor and his innards. He quickly reloaded and then he turned to the Grunts, taking out the few that carried needlers with the remaining bullets.

Ducking behind the corner, he grabbed a plasma pistol, waited for his shields to recharge, and for the Jackals to be slain by the Warthog that had just rolled around the corner, .50 cal bullets vaporizing their shields and breaking their bodies, hurling them into the wall.

That was enough to send the Brute Major and Captain Major running for the Ghosts, roughly ordering the Grunts out into the line of fire, and no sooner had the Grunts reluctantly disembarked their vehicles, they were splattered with their own blood in a hail of bullets the pinged off the Ghosts.

Leaping out from behind cover, the Chief overcharged the plasma pistol into one of the Ghosts, stunning the vehicle and he yanked his hand off the scorching weapon as it overheated.

The Ghost began to automatically start up, but the Warthog turret was already being fired at the stricken Covenant vehicle. Pieces of purple metal began to fall to the ground as small explosions racked the vehicle, culminating in one large explosion that blasted the Major's corpse into the low ceiling.

By then the other Ghost had returned fire, a barrage of plasma bolts splashing against the Master Chief's shields, forcing the Spartan behind cover. The Warthog attempted to assist, but the Captain Major turned and fired at it, knocking the pilot off balance.

The Chief leapt out again, and fired the plasma pistol a few times before overcharging it into the Ghost as he had done before. He ducked back behind cover and shook his hand as the fire from the Warthog ripped into the Ghost, and the stricken vehicle's fuel cell exploded.

Shields recharging, the Master Chief walked down the tunnel, and when the UNSC forces were arrayed behind him, he opened the next door, revealing a massive expansive lake bed with cruising Ghosts and a heavy Covenant garrison.

A claret armored Wraith fired fuel rod blasts continuously into the air, and the Longsword and Hornet pilots worked furiously to avoid them, but it was a losing battle, and every so often, a flaming wreck toppled from the sky.

Lord Hood's voice came over the COM. _"Kilo 23, this is UNSC Forward

Unto Dawn. I need a sit-rep, Commander." _

"Atmospheric disturbances is intensifying above the artifact, Admiral," replied Keyes over the COM.

"And Sierra-117?" replied Hood.

_"Moving as fast as he can, sir. I know he'll get it done," _said Keyes confidently, as the Master Chief looped around the side of the embankment, the Warthog charging ahead and past a Lance, taking out two Grunts before taking aim at the Anti-Air Wraith.

The Spartan threw a spike grenade, striking a Brute Captain squarely in the chest. The Brute staggered and roared, charging at the Chief, but the grenade exploded, tearing open his chest.

The Spartan winced at the sight of such a wound, and hosed the Grunts with plasma pistol fire. Three fell quickly, but the last put up a larger fight, firing its needler at the Master Chief. The Chief ducked behind a crate, and ripped the needles out of his armor, primed a plasma grenade, and tossed it over his shoulder, before picking up a spiker. There was a shriek, and a flash of blue light as the grenade detonated, painting the concrete blue. He ran for the small building by the Warthog, and found what he was looking for â€" a weapons rack stocked with battle rifles. Dumping the spiker on the ground, the Spartan snatched up the weapon, and also headed up the top of the building to grab a sniper rifle, discarding the empty assault rifle after emptying it into a Grunt and a pair of Jackals that were too off guard to defend themselves.

A Phantom deployed a standard Wraith at the far side of the lake bed, before opening fire on the Warthog, slaying the driver. The Chief grabbed the spiker again, put a barrage of spikes through the last Grunts head, grabbed the battle rifle, and ran for the 'Hog, jumping into the driver's seat and roaring down a concrete ramp towards the Anti-Air Wraith.

His gunner opened fire, and the Chief swung the Warthog around the back of the Wraith, avoiding the Brute gunner's return fire with the plasma turret. Heavy bullets sank into the less armored back of the tank, and several giant explosions shook the vehicle, blowing off its pontoons and slaying its operators.

The Master Chief heard Hocus' delighted yell over the COM. _"Hell yeah! Boom! The Fly Boys are gonna love us for that!"

_

"That-a-way, Chief!" added Sergeant Johnson_. "Target destroyed. Move to the next area, over,"_ he said.

Turning the Warthog towards the next factory, the Chief's gunner blasted the plasma mortar on the back of the Wraith with heavy turret fire, also carving through the gunner's skull. The Chief dodged out of the way of a plasma blast, and the gunner took aim at the hatch, eventually puncturing its way through with enough bullets to gut the pilot.

The Master Chief and the remaining Marines exited the lake bed into the confines of the factory again, where a War Chieftain wielding a plasma turret and his attendant Brutes, Jackals, and Grunts had a

pair of Marines pinned down in the adjacent section.

* * *

><p>Private Jenny Storm ducked back behind a bunch of sandbags, avoiding plasma fire from a group of Jackals. She returned fire with the machine gun turret " for about a few seconds before the Covenant fire forced her back undercover. Then she saw a flash of green ceramic armor as the Master Chief, seated in the side of a Warthog, burst into the factory on the lower floor, leapt out, and opened fire with his battle rifle on a Brute Major.<p>

"They just keep coming!" yelled Private Burns as he frantically reloaded his assault rifle.

"Check your fire!" yelled Storm, firing a .50 cal burst at a Grunt Major. "It's the Chief! Flush 'em out, sir. We'll nail them with the .50."

The Spartan nodded, and primed a plasma grenade, throwing the deadly blue sphere up the stairs at a Brute Captain. The Brute cried out in shock, and the grenade detonated, spraying the startled Covenant with red-blue blood.

The War Chieftain wasn't deterred, and continued to hose the sandbags with plasma fire from his massive turret. The Master Chief's gunner, still operating the turret, opened fire, leaving the Chief to take care of the little resistance on the ground floor, simply leaving the job to a plasma grenade. He dropped the last Grunt with BR fire, and snatched up its plasma grenades.

The War Chieftain, despite being under fire from two massive turrets, was still holding out, and the Chief took aim with the sniper rifle, firing and dropping the War Chieftain's shields greatly. Bullets from the turrets finished off the Brute's shields, and a well placed sniper round spilled his brains over the ground.

"Flee!" screamed the Grunts, breaking and running. Of course, there was nowhere to run, and the Marines finished them off quickly, though one of the Grunts charged two plasma grenades and ran at them. They put him down before he could reach them, and the grenades destroyed the Grunt's corpse.

"We've made a hole. Hurry, before any more Covenant show up!" called Burns. Then he noticed the Warthog the Master Chief had brought from the last section. "Hey! We got a hog!" he crowed.

The Marines defending the warehouse opened the door. The Chief and accompanying Marines headed through.

"We're down to our last mags, sir," admitted Storm panting. "Thought those last ones had us."

"We've got a Phantom, overhead!" yelled the Warthog's driver.

The Phantom hovering ominously overhead above the glass roof frightened the Marines a little. As the Master Chief and Marines quickly moved to the next section the glass roof shattered and a horde of Drones descended, unleashing a storm of plasma bolts from their weapons.

The Chief opened fire with the battle rifle, doing his best to ignore the plasma splashing across his chestplate. He focused on a single Drone at a time, and slew three before rolling to evade the fire.

Occupied in tracking the Chief, two Drones faltered under heavy Vulcan fire from the Marines. Storm took aim with a rocket launcher and blasted the thickest cluster of Drones. The explosion shredded six outright and crippled four others for the Marines to take out.

By then, the Master Chief had emerged from behind his cover and riddled another Drone with bullets before a well timed spike grenade minced another five Drones. The last pair, both wielding needlers, took several rounds and the two Marines who were piloting the Warthog's lives before they fell to the floor.

With the Drone swarm fought off, the Master Chief and the Marines entered the next factory tunnel section, leaving the battered Warthog behind.

Then, the Chief's vision darkened, time slowed, and the familiar nausea returned as an image of Cortana appeared in his visor.

"I have defied gods and demons..." she said slowly.

The Spartan quickly shook his head, and continued down the tunnel. At the end of the tunnel were four Mongoose vehicles, next to a rack of weapons. The Marines rushed to man the ATVs, while others headed for the weapon rack and grabbed rocket launchers and spare ammunition.

"Mount up, Rockets in back!" yelled Storm, heading over to grab ammo for her own launcher.

The Chief opened the tunnel's door and sunlight streamed in.

"Gotta move fast, and punch hard!" said Storm, holstering her last rocket.

The Chief hopped on a Mongoose and Storm leapt on the back. Gunning their engines, the small ATV force joined the Marines in the assault on the claret plated Anti-Air Wraiths in the neighboring lake bed. While a small squad of Marines were pinned down on the boardwalk on the northern side of the lake bed, Covenant vehicles milled in the center.

"_We've got Anti-Air Wraiths in the next lake bed, Chief!_" radioed Johnson.

The ATV's quickly converged on the first Anti-Air Wraith, the Master Chief taking the Mongoose up the ramp and getting Storm to take out a small knot of Covenant infantry with a single rocket. They turned their attention to the Wraith, and the Marines let loose a barrage of rockets, and then reloaded as the Wraith shuddered, its fuel rod cannons shut down, and it exploded.

"One down, one to go!" yelled a Marine as he put his Mongoose into a tight turn.

A few Choppers along with Phantoms carrying Ghosts overwhelmed the lake bed with Banshees above.

Ignoring them, the Mongoose convoy sped towards the second Anti-Air Wraith. Fully reloaded, the Marines on the back opened fire with their rocket launchers, and once again, the Wraith was taken out in a large explosion.

With the Wraith gone, the Hornets could move in, and soon the Ghosts began to fall. For their part, the Marines on the Mongooses refrained from using their launchers, and left the air support to a pair of missile pods mounted on auto-feed bases. The Banshees soon began to fall in droves, and the combined firepower had eventually cleared the lake bed of Covenant resistance.

As the last Chopper exploded, Sergeant Johnson's voice crackled over the COM. _"Both AA Wraiths have been neutralized...standby. Something big, closing in on your location." _

The Master Chief focused his hearing as much as he dared. He could hear the booming of the anti-aircraft emplacement in the distance, but there was also an audible ominous mechanical grinding noise.

"What's that sound?" asked Private Chips Dubbo over the COM, as the booms and grinding got louder. _"It's getting closer!" _he muttered, and the Chief saw him bent over his Mongoose controls, looking around nervously.

"Oh, this can't be good man..." moaned Dubbo's gunner, swiveling with his rocket launcher.

_"Scarab!" _barked Sergeant Johnson. _"Find some cover. Now!"_

Even the Chief's blood ran cold as the massive Scarab walker lumbered down from the roof of the factory onto the lake bed, and dust rose as its four mighty legs slammed into the ground, destroying a Troop Transport Warthog in the process.

For a few seconds there was silence. Then the Marine vehicles and the pair of Marine-manned missile pod turrets opened up in volleys.

"Use rockets! Target its joints!" yelled Dubbo's gunner, firing a rocket. The projectile was bang on target, smashing into the Scarab's leg joint.

The gigantic walker began to swivel towards Dubbo's Mongoose.

"Oh crap!" yelled Dubbo, and he gunned the engine, shooting forward and stopping under the massive walker, just avoiding the massive pillar of liquid energy that erupted from the 'eye' of the walker.

The Chief opened his communications. "Everyone, under the Scarab, now!" he ordered, speeding under the Scarab. Storm took aim at the core of the vehicle, but the rocket barely did anything to the giant walker.

Johnson agreed. _"Its armor's too thick!" _he yelled. _"Aim for its

legs, Chief!" _

Storm fired again, striking the same spot that Dubbo's gunner had, and the other Marines all fired in unison. The combined forces of the rocket launchers and the twin missile pod emplacements eventually took out one of the Scarab's joints, forcing it to lower and consume all power into getting back up again " and deactivating its primary weapon.

"Now, while it's down! Find a way inside!" cried the driver of one of the Mongooses.

"Jump on top of it Chief, just like New Mombasa,"_ agreed Johnson.

The Spartan leapt up, planting his feet one the Mongoose's seat, and then leapt again, landing squarely on the edge of the walkers' troop bay. Storm took the controls, and headed over to join the other Marines in keeping the gunners occupied.

"Look for something big...power core, something like that,"_ advised Johnson._"You'll know it when you see it."_

On the upper deck of the Scarab, several Brutes, Jackals and Grunts awaited the Chief, forcing the Chief to kill all in his path. Before the gunner could swivel the plasma turret away from the Mongooses and towards the Chief, the Spartan fired his battle rifle in quick succession, snapping the Brute Major's helmet and puncturing his skull. The Chief fired at the Jackal's exposed hand, preventing it from returning fire, and seized his chance to grab the turret, ripping it free of the anti-grav base, and hosing the pair of Grunt Ultras and the helpless Jackal with heavy plasma fire.

A Brute Major charged around the corner, firing his spiker, but the Master Chief easily put the Brute down, shattering his armor and his bones with the heavy fire. Then there was an explosion, a Captain Major had stepped out around the corner, firing his brute shot.

The Chief threw aside the turret, and then threw a spike grenade that he'd just swiped from the ground. The grenade didn't kill the Brute, but gave the Chief ample time to slay the Brute with bullets from the BR55HB.

Rounding the corner that the Brutes had emerged from, the Chief finally found the power core. Shielding surrounded groups of thick worms that were linked into the ship in a large cross.

The Chief primed both plasma grenades, and threw them in, the grenades bonding to the walls of the core. He backed away, and heard a massive explosion.

"Get away! It's gonna blow!" _yelled Dubbo over the COM.

The Chief saw the four Mongooses speed away from the Scarab, and he jumped off the Scarab and ran for it.

Behind him, the Scarab detonated violently, blue flame rippling across it as wreckage was hurled into the air. The Chief felt the shockwave as his shields worked to absorb the blow, dropping and causing the warning lights in his HUD to start pulsing

rapidly.

_"Well done, Chief! I'm sending in a few Pelicans," _called Commander Keyes over the COM.

"One more target, Chief," added Johnson._"There's a Covenant AA gun in the next area. Take it down and Lord Hood can start his attack run."_

**Happy New Year everybody! Hope you all liked this chapter, but I'm not sure how fast I'll be able to do the next one, as always. **

I probably won't finish it until next year . . . shocking, eh?

**Please review, and please let me know if the combat is getting too repetitive. **

6. The Portal

Halo: The Installation

Hey everyone, how's the New Year treating you all?!

It's not treating me nicely â€" I have to go to summer school on the 4**th****, so expect my updates to slow down during February while I have exams.**

But enough about me, this chapter will focus on the Arbiter as much as possible, as he gets quite neglected by the game sometimes. Future chapters will also do so, particularly when they're on the Ark.

The Portal

The Arbiter stood in the bay of the human machine that they called a "Pelican," his energy sword at his hip and a plasma rifle clutched in his fist. With a sizable hole now punched in the Covenant's anti-air assault batteries, more air support could be given to the battered human forces. The Arbiter was to be with the highest priority units.

Initially, he'd stayed up with the human leaders, unable to join the Spartan in the human city. After he'd watched an unsuccessful attack on the anti-air gun, or "Mantis," with the lesser human projectiles doing nothing to the hard outer shell of the gun, he'd taken over the strategy to destroy it, despite the reluctance of the human leaders to let an Elite do their work.

"The only way you will damage, let alone destroy that weapon, is by destroying its core, which is periodically exposed to prevent overheating," the Arbiter had explained.

Lord Hood had looked reluctant, but the Commander and the dark skinned Sergeant had backed him up. "Arbiter saved our skins from the Chieftain of the Brutes, and all of us from Halo, sir," Johnson had said. "I don't think he needs to prove himself any more than he has done."

And so, the Arbiter had been put on a Pelican (though as the machine was designed for humans, it had very little leg room or standing height for him), and he watched as the door bay opened. The human Marines that were accompanying him filed out, and the Elite followed them, leaping out and landing.

He saw four of the small human vehicles nicknamed "Mongoosees," speeding towards them, one driven by a huge figure in green armor.

The Arbiter nodded at the Spartan, and went over to a missile pod emplacement. The base had malfunctioned, and the auto fire was disabled. The Elite grabbed hold of the handles and wrenched the pod off the base.

The surviving Marines led the Elite and the Spartan to a locked door leading to the factory's warehouse.

The Arbiter looked around at the corpses of the Grunts, or the Unggoy, as their species called themselves. Though he spoke harshly of their punishment, he felt sorrow for the poor creatures " though their lives had been bolstered by their addition into the Covenant, many wrongs and abuse had been directed at them. All for a false belief and a scheming Prophet. "There was honor in our Covenant once...and there shall be again!" vowed the Arbiter, clutching his fist.

"We've got this area locked down, sir," said a female human to the Spartan. "Follow us, we'll get you through."

The Spartan nodded, and the door opened up, leading to a dirty tin-walled section filled with wounded Marines and civilians lying on the floor. Several grim-faced Marines were standing behind sandbags, tending to the wounded, and operating the sole UNSC field radio available.

The Spartan suddenly staggered, and braced himself against the wall.

* * *

><p>"I am your shield. I am your sword," whispered the image of Cortana in the Master Chief's visor.<p>

The Chief shook his head to clear the nausea, and saw the Arbiter looking at him.

"Are you all right, Spartan?" asked the Arbiter.

"Fine," replied the Chief, readying his assault rifle.

"Are you worried about your construct?" asked the Arbiter.

The Master Chief must have looked surprised, even under his helmet, for the Arbiter chuckled under his helmet. "We are not always bloodthirsty monsters, Spartan, just as you are not always demons in combat," he remarked. "Many of us yearn for friends and loved ones lost as well, though not as much as humanity does."

"Ahh!" yelled a Marine. "Somebody, get me some morphine!"

The Arbiter gave the Marine a look of pity. "How many humans have we caused this to happen to? How many have we unjustly killed? We are in your debt, Spartan, for being allowed this chance to prove ourselves."

"There's only one of you," pointed out the Chief.

The Arbiter gave a grim smile. "A start though, is it not?" he remarked.

* * *

><p>The Arbiter fell silent again, and listened to the voices that had begun to play through the radio, attentively monitored by a pair of Marines operating it.<p>

"_All Brute cruisers are pulling back to Truth's ship,"_ declared a human naval officer._"Winds inside the storm just hit 200 kilometers per hour. Energy cascades all over the artifact!"_

There was a moderate pause within the radio conversation, leaving the Arbiter to ponder the human's statement. The Jiralhanae were pulling back? That made little sense now, their batteries hadn't really been that depleted by the Spartan's actions.

Voices began to play across the radio again, this time that of the female Commander, Keyes. _"Admiral, a single Covenant ship has slipped in-system!"_ she explained.

"Just one?" replied Lord Hood's voice._"What's its range and disposition?"_

"Above the artifact, inside the orbital line," Keyes replied._"Seems to be holding steady."_

"The attack proceeds as planned, Commander," warned Hood_. "We're not going to get another shot at Truth."_

"Sir. Yes, sir," said Keyes.

The Arbiter exchanged a worried glance with the Spartan. Another ship? But why? Why was it not already engaged in battle? The Arbiter couldn't help but feel that it was something more than a latecomer.

The Spartan began to move away, breaking the Arbiter's concentration. Hefting the missile pod, the Arbiter followed him, passing through a stained area of bolted tin plates until they reached the periphery of the warehouse, where a trio of Marines were pinned down under sandbags as spiker projectiles flew through the air. Farther forward was a steel bridge where a pair of Marines frantically opened fire on Brutes all around them with a heavy machine gun, slicing through a Brute Major as the Arbiter arrived.

"We've got company!" called a Marine upon seeing the approaching UNSC reinforcements.

"Get back!" yelled the Arbiter, firing the missile pod. The Archer missile scythed towards a pair of Captains, and even though they

tried to dodge, the missile slew them in a powerful explosion and badly wounded a Captain Ultra as he fired his carbine at the Marines.

The Spartan fired his assault weapon at the Captain Ultra, shattering his chest armor. Heavy machine gun fire finished him off.

Two Majors fired their spike rifles at the Marines on the bridge, forcing them behind cover. The Arbiter fired another missile, knocking them down as they dodged. The Marines that they'd been harassing fired the heavy gun at the Brutes, slaying them before they could rise.

Another Captain threw a spike grenade, catching a Marine in the stomach. His comrade threw himself off the bridge as the grenade tore his fellow apart, drenching the bridge in blood.

The Marines all opened fire on the Brute, and his armor shattered. He looked at himself in shock, clutching his spike rifle in pain, and then fell limply to the ground.

As a Marine gingerly picked his way back to the blood covered turret, another group of Brutes charged from the next section, chasing two more Marines.

A surviving Jiralhanae Ultra from the previous wave tried to warn the charging Brutes of the impending doom but was too late.

"No, fall back!" yelled the Ultra.

They then ran towards the bridge and a Marine fired the bridge-mounted turret, silencing the Ultra after a few seconds of fire. "Hold the line! Enemy charging!" called the Marine, keeping up the fire.

"Be careful!" warned the Arbiter, taking aim with the missile pod. The two fleeing Marines dived aside as the Elite fired another missile, colliding with the pursuing Major and blowing him apart before he could fire his brute shot, the shock also stripping the Minor behind him of his helmet, exposing him to fire from the Spartan's battle weapon.

The Arbiter, the Spartan, and the surviving Marines made their way into the next section, where behind a mass of stacked crates a Brute violently throttled a construction worker. Three other workers armed with pistols fled from the Brute and his pack.

The throttling Brute roared out. "Kill them for honor!"

"Get to safety!" screamed a fleeing worker.

The Spartan fired his battle weapon, the burst quickly slaying the Brute, who dropped the worker to the ground as he fell in a pool of blood. Two Majors charged, and the Arbiter fired the missile pod again, the missile locking onto one of the Majors and blowing both apart. The Marines fired on another Jiralhanae, shattering his armor. Berserking, the Brute charged, colliding with a civilian and shattering his bones with a brutal blow before the Spartan finished him off, dumping his assault weapon on the ground and scooping up a shotgun.

The next section was littered with civilian corpses and a few live factory workers cowering in the corner. A door leading to the outside of the factory was nearby, is opening up, and a group of four construction workers ran in.

However, they were cut down by two massive green beams of energy blowing up the fusion coils next to the workers: a pair of giant steel-blue armored titans " Covenant Hunters, or Mgalekgolo " appeared, running full tilt towards them. The explosions and energy blasts fried the workers, rendering their corpses unrecognizable.

The Hunters charged in over the worker corpses and after the Arbiter, the Spartan, and the awaiting Marines.

The cowering workers got up, relieved to see fellow humans. "I thought we were the only ones left-" one of them began happily, and then his celebration was cut short as the workers saw the Hunters and retreated behind the approaching Marine forces.

"Gotta get around 'em, boys! Look for gaps in their armor!" yelled Sergeant Stacker.

The Arbiter fired two missiles at the Hunters. Both connected, blasting the Hunter into fragments of armor and the two foot long, wrist thick worms that had up the Hunters biomass.

The other Hunter gave a growl of rage, and charged at the Marines. The Arbiter fired again, but the missile barely slowed the Hunter down, and he swept his shield into the Marines, killing two outright. The Arbiter threw the pod down and drew his energy sword, but the Spartan had already dodged behind the Hunter, and blasted its unprotected back point blank range with his shotgun, tearing through enough worms to disrupt the collective consciousness of the Hunter.

The Hunter pitched forward, crashed into the ground and lay still.

The workers looked at their saviors. "Weren't we fighting these guys?" a worker asked Stacker, gesturing warily at the Arbiter.

"Key word being 'were,'" said Stacker. "The Arbiter's all good."

The Marines, the Spartan, and the Arbiter ran past the Hunter corpses and through the open door to a series of low-roofed buildings where a Jiralhanae Chieftain awaited them with numerous other Brutes, Kig-Yar " Jackals, and Unggoy.

The Prophet of Truth sermonized from a holographic pedestal behind them. "Take heart, my brothers! Only our enemies should fear this raging storm!" _declared the Prophet.

The Arbiter picked up the missile pod again, and fired the last missile, taking out two Grunts and a Jackal, and damaging an Ultra's power armor.

The Spartan finished the Ultra off with a fragmentation grenade, and took aim with his assault weapon, dropping a Grunt Ultra in a

prolonged burst.

With many of his troops dead, the Chieftain retreated back around the corner, where a pack of Brutes backed him up. The Grunts and the Jackals were ordered forward, and the Arbiter grabbed the fallen Ultra's carbine. He fired three quick shots, putting two Grunts down. Suddenly there was a blast of green energy as a Jackal snuck around the corner and fired an overcharged plasma pistol blast at the Arbiter, dropping his shields.

The Arbiter fired, but missed the Jackal's hand behind its shield. Then there was a loud boom, and the Jackal fell to the ground with a large hole in its flank, courtesy of the Spartan's shotgun. A Brute Minor, stripped of its armor by the human workers' pistol fire, charged around the corner, and knocked a worker flying, though the man wasn't seriously injured. The Spartan fired the shotgun again, and the Brute's face distorted itself. Another Minor threw a spike grenade, and the Arbiter threw down a deployable cover to absorb the blast. Then the Spartan threw one of his own spike grenades, and while the Minor was down and out, the rest of the Brutes each retaliated with more grenades.

The Arbiter and the Spartan fled from the swarm of grenades, which detonated and took a massive chunk out of the ground. With the pounding of his shields alleviated, the shields recharged with a flicker of blue light.

Having missed the group, the Chieftain charged, dodging from side to side, gravity hammer at the ready.

A worker confidently stepped forward. "I got this!" he called, and he threw a plasma grenade, straight and true at the Chieftain.

"No, get back, human!" yelled the Arbiter.

It was too late. Plasma grenades didn't stick to the shields of Brute Chieftains, and this time was no exception. The grenade fell to the floor and detonated harmlessly, while the Brute just kept on coming, and swung, his gravity hammer taking out the worker effortlessly. The worker's broken body was hurled limply through the air, and he crashed into a building and lay still.

The two remaining workers opened fire, but the magnums did little to the Brute's shields, and he threw a flare to distract them. The workers cried out, and the Brute dispatched them.

The Arbiter and the Spartan had dodged the swing, and leapt away from the Brute, still taking fire from the other Brutes with their carbines and brute shots. The Arbiter spared a moment to fire quickly at a Captain Ultra, the rapid blasts cracking his helmet and poisoning him with the deadly toxins of the carbine ammunition.

The Spartan fired quick shotgun blasts at the Chieftain, dodged around him nimbly " until the weapon ran out of ammunition.

"Spartan, move!" yelled the Arbiter, throwing a plasma grenade.

His aim was perfect, striking the hilt of the gravity hammer. The grenade detonated, blowing the hammer out of the Jiralhanae's hands.

The Chieftain swatted the Spartan aside with a glancing blow and headed for the Arbiter, his hated foe. "After your death Arbiter, the rest of the Sangheili will live as our slaves!" he snarled, throwing a punch.

The Arbiter caught his fist and turned it aside, before lashing out with a powerful kick that nearly winded the Brute. He grappled with the creature for a few seconds; unable to receive any support for fear that the fire would hit the Arbiter. Instead, they focused on the other Brutes, keeping them from interfering.

Then the Brute was dragged backwards â€" despite being far shorter, the Spartan had grabbed the Brute and dragged it backwards with unearthly strength. "Arbiter, gut him!" yelled the Spartan, struggling to restrain the Chieftain.

The Arbiter ignited his energy sword and sliced upwards, boiling away the Brutes flesh. The Brute screamed in pain, and the Spartan dropped the alien to the ground to die.

While they'd been grappling with the Chieftain, the other Marines had finally defeated the Covenant defenders and continued on ahead. Scooping up a carbine, while the Spartan moved on with only his battle rifle, the Arbiter saw Truth's hologram continuing to give a sermon. Though it was a familiar sight that had once filled the Elite with pride, now it only angered him.

_"Darkened skies and lashing fire are all that remains for them when we, the worthy, have passed beyond," _Truth was declaring.

Gripping his carbine, the Arbiter growled at the Prophet's hologram "I will not be shamed. Not again! Not by you!" The Spartan looked at him, and the Arbiter forced himself to calm down.

The Spartan, the Arbiter, and the remaining Marines charged around the remaining buildings to the hill where the massive anti-aircraft emplacement stood. Before the hill's slope were a Marine, a structure that the Spartan explained was a Surface-to-Air Missile Launcher, and a few corpses behind sandbags and a weapons rack. The Spartan snatched up an assault weapon from the rack, holstering his battle rifle. Grunts tentatively ran down the slope to face the onrushing UNSC forces while mid-way up the hill, a Grunt Heavy manning a turreted Plasma Cannon stood side-by-side with a War Chieftain wielding a fuel rod gun with his Captains and Bodyguards â€" the pale blue armored Brutes in similar armor to Captains. Meanwhile, the anti-air emplacement â€" nicknamed a Mantis â€" opened fire on a surging UNSC Longsword, destroying it and catching it on fire as the wreck soared into the cliffs below.

Over the human frequencies, the female commander's voice sounded. _"Chief! Hood's ships are closing fast! Destroy that gun; we're out of time." _

"We'll get it done," reassured the Spartan.

They pushed up the hill, taking down all Covenant defense. The Grunts fell quickly to a Marine manning the heavy machine gun, and while a Jackal tried to support the Grunt Heavy, the Arbiter shattered its wrist and then its skull with well placed carbine fire. The Spartan used a burst from his battle weapon to dispatch the Grunt, and the

Arbiter picked up the plasma cannon.

The Brutes had retreated back, and fuel rods began sizzling through the air towards the Arbiter. It was simple for the Elite to dodge them, even while holding the heavy cannon, and the Spartan, for his part, threw down a bubble shield that he'd appropriated from one of the Brutes among the buildings.

Emerging from the shield, the Arbiter fired the plasma cannon at a Bodyguard. The blasts of plasma quickly took down his armor and his life a few seconds later. A brute shot grenade exploded near the Arbiter, dropping his shields. The Arbiter dropped the cannon and hefted twin plasma grenades, both finding their target and killing the Captain Major that had fired at him. Most of the Brute were focusing on the currently more agile Spartan, who dodged and dived out of the way of their fire, keeping up the pressure of his battle weapon bursts. He fired a burst that killed another Captain, reloaded, and then fired at the War Chieftain, before diving out of the way of his fuel rod blasts. This gave the Arbiter ample time to drain the War Chieftain's shields with the plasma cannon. The Brute staggered, and fired one last blast that connected accidentally with a group of Grunts, before his armor began to crack, and the Spartan took advantage of this to riddle it with bursts from his battle weapon, slaying it. The Brute dropped his weapon, and fell to the ground with a crash.

"Leader dead!" yelled a surviving Grunt. "Run away!"

The two Jackals still alive held their ground, but the Spartan took care of them with a spike grenade. The Arbiter emptied the plasma cannon's battery into the last remaining Brute, and threw the heavy cannon at a Grunt opening fire with its needler. The Grunt screamed as the cannon collided with it and knocked off the cliff to its death.

The voice of the Sergeant barked over the battlenet. _"Chief, that gun's been firing non-stop: it's gotta be running hot! It's gonna be opening up its access panel!" _

The anti-aircraft emplacement's lower section opened to reveal a white sphere. Steam vented as the panel continually opened. The Spartan began firing, but the Arbiter knew these weapons, and how to destroy them. Scavenging a plasma grenade, he motioned for the Spartan to get back and tossed it in, where it bonded to the core and detonated, destroying the sphere.

* * *

><p>The Mantis exploded, sending the upper section flying down the cliff.<p>

The Master Chief walked away from it, slapped his MA5C into his hands and stood with the Arbiter on the cliff side of the crater on the hill of the recently destroyed anti-aircraft emplacement. He scanned the ruined city before him calmly, and then looked up as multiple squadrons of Longswords streaked overhead, followed by three UNSC frigates, including the _UNSC Forward Unto Dawn_ â€" Lord Hood's flagship. The Covenant fleet was hovering before them, with the Forerunner Dreadnought centered below them at the center of the Artifact.

"All ships: fire at will!" called Lord Hood over the COM.

The frigates engaged the Forerunner Dreadnought. Their powerful Magnetic Accelerator Cannons discharged in volleys, and colossal explosions coated the Forerunner ship's surface " but the ship remained unscathed.

Then, the Master Chief watched in shock as the Forerunner structure began to open up like a starfish. The Dreadnought lowered into the structure, and an energy beam began to focus on it. The beam of light grew thicker and expanded, sending off a massive shockwave.

The Longsword pilots fought for control as they were dragged towards the portal, though the larger frigates managed to withstand the powerful force.

On the cliff, stray debris hurtled past the Master Chief and the Arbiter, and the two ducked and grabbed hold of nearby boulders, anchoring themselves to the ground.

As everything blacked out, the Chief heard Cortana's voice again.

"This...is the way the world ends," said Cortana's voice in the Master Chief's mind.

Dazed, the Master Chief raised his head, and looked up in the sky. A large glowing sphere of blue light had appeared in the sky above the artifact, centered by pitch-black darkness, and the vessels of both the UNSC and Covenant Loyalist fleets were drifting in the air, disorganized. The large fins of the Portal were focusing energy on the sphere.

Lord Hood's voice coughed over the radio. _"What did Truth just do?"_ he asked, coughing. _"Did he activate the rings?"_ _

"No, sir," replied Commander Keyes with a grim tone in her voice. _"But he certainly did something..."_ _

The Chief looked at the Arbiter as the Elite roared angrily at the Forerunner Dreadnought as it rose to safety into the sphere, followed in close order by the rest of the Covenant fleet. The ships disappeared with a flash of blue light when they came into contact with the sphere.

"Evac wounded and regroup," began Hood wearily. _"Wherever Truth went-"_ _

"Sir, new contact - slipping in!" interrupted a Naval Officer over the COM.

The Chief looked around just in time to see a damaged CCS-class battlecruiser emerge from SlipSpace to the east of Voi, and hurtle slowly just over the Chief and the Arbiter. It was discolored and it was smoking with rancid fumes. The air darkened and smog rose, veiling the sun from sight.

Then the Master Chief realized that it wasn't fumes that were pouring from the damaged cruiser.

They were _spores._

As the damaged ship lost altitude and crashed to the ground out of sight, there was a flash of light and a deep rumbling, followed by silence.

An omen of ancient evil was in the air.

Clutching his carbine, the Arbiter asked. "What is it? More Brutes?"

The Master Chief shook his head. "Worse."

**I've done it. **

I made a pledge to get to the arrival of the Flood, and I've kept that pledge. I'm looking quite forward to the next chapter, where I can hopefully invoke some horror in the writing.

It'll be the first written account that I've seen of the Arbiter fighting them.

Oh god, do I look forward to it.

**I didn't have any repetitiveness concerns this chapter, mainly because it was mainly the Arbiter doing the fighting, and I had the first Hunter confrontation to work with. **

So please rate and review. You know you want to.

7. Floodgate

Halo: The Installation.

**Sheesh, talk about a break between these chapters. Breathing the horror into the Flood was always going to take a while, coupled with my lack of free time at the moment. **

Actually doing this can be quite hard, and rather annoying to see the story moments. I had to do this multiple times to remember all of the battles. It was easier once I remembered that it was the reverse of The Storm though.

Floodgate

As the smoke from the crash began to settle in the abandoned city of Voi, there were still Covenant troops fighting to overpower the Marines below, though most of them had been dealt with after the vortex had appeared. Men and Brutes exchanged projectiles and grenades, and what few Grunts remained just cowered, still spooked by the vortex spinning above.

As a Brute fired his spiker at Private Lewis Jacksmith, the Marine dodged behind a heap of Ghost wreckage. Reloading his assault rifle, he saw a small fleshy pod emerge from the wreckage of the nearby Covenant cruiser. It had been a miracle that the ship hadn't crushed him when it had crash landed after that massive . . . thing appeared above New Mombasa.

The pod hopped on its tentacles towards a dying Brute, and leaped gently onto the downed creature. Then it stabbed the red fronds of its penetrators into the Brute, and the Brute arched its back and screamed in horror as it began to convulse, thrashing as green-gray flesh erupted over its head and shoulders.

More of the tiny pods poured out of the ship, dancing towards the combatants and stabbing the dead bodies of humans and Brutes alike with the red fronds on their penetrators. The bodies convulsed and then mutated rapidly, the human's heads being forced aside and their left arms growing a massive three clawed hand over their previous appendages, while the faces of the Brutes were forced apart as the pods nestled into the corpses.

Picking up discarded weapons, the reanimated bodies charged, followed by more pods that wrapped their tentacles around the throats of living foes and drove their sharp penetrators into their nervous systems, tapping into their spines. The doomed fighters began to mutate as their until-recently deceased comrades and foes had, two humans snapping their own necks before collapsing, thrashing about, and then rising with unearthly howls.

Jacksmith's eyes widened in horror, and he turned to run, but a reanimated Brute had already wrapped its claw around his neck, while a pod danced towards the doomed man.

Giant, bloated figures emerged from the wreckage as well, waddling towards the battle on stumpy legs.

The Flood " the parasitic alien race that had driven the Forerunner race to wipe the galaxy clean of all sentient life through the use of the Halo Rings " was on Earth.

* * *

><p>Over the COM, the Master Chief listened to Miranda Keyes' horrified voice. "The Flood - it's spreading, all over the city."

"How do we contain it?" asked Lord Hood. He hadn't been privy to the events of either of the Halo Installations, where the Flood had overwhelmed the UNSC both times " it had been the Flood that singlehandedly made both missions into disasters. There were very few people who had encountered the Flood firsthand and lived.

Keyes replied without hesitation. _"Find the crashed Flood ship; overload its engine core. We either destroy this city, or risk losing the entire planet."_

Lord Hood replied equally quickly. _"Do it."_

_"Chief, make your way to the crash site," _ordered Keyes.

"Yes ma'am," replied the Chief.

How? How could the Flood get to Earth? The Arbiter had assured him that the Elite fleets at Delta Halo had them contained the parasite. _Looks like one ship slipped through_, thought the Chief. _It followed me home._

As he and the Arbiter, who looked just as shocked as the Chief did, headed back into Voi, the Chief looked to the right and blanched, raising his battle rifle. Two Marines were on a cliff edge, fighting off several infected soldiers â€" Flood combat forms. With the Marines overrun, the pod-like infection forms moved in to mutate the unlucky Marines into more combat Forms.

Tortured screams echoed across the cliff face.

The Arbiter raised his carbine, but the Spartan shook his head, and placed a hand on the Elite's arm. The Elite was quite surprised.

"Focus," cautioned the Chief. "There's nothing that we can do for them from here."

The Arbiter nodded, and joined the Chief in a sprint down the hill. As they re-entered the city, Gunnery Sergeant Reynolds' voice echoed across the COM. _"All squads, report!" _

A pair of human combat forms jumped across the building on the right. The Chief opened fire on one with the battle rifle, tearing the body to pieces before it got close to them. The rounds tore into the mutated head, tearing it open and exposing the foggy skull, digested by the Flood.

"Multiple contacts, unknown hostiles," cried a Marine over the COM.

"There are some powerful weapons we've not yet used..." remarked the Arbiter, looking at a discarded flamethrower.

The Chief shook his head. "That's more for psychological effect," he explained. "I don't think that the Flood can be so easily intimidated."

Turning around the corner, the Master Chief found a Marine squad on a loading ramp. The doors back into the hanger where the two Hunters lay was sealed, but another pair of Marines had pried open a hatch behind some sandbags.

"There! Over there! We're surrounded, Sergeant!" yelled Private Simmons over the COM.

_"Aaaaah!" _screamed a Marine's voice.

"Fall back, fall back!" ordered Reynolds, waving the squad away from the door.

"Sergeant, come on!" cried a Marine desperately, wringing her hands as she waited by the sandbags.

The Flood struck. Infection forms and combat forms descended from above and swarmed on the Marines at the ramp, killing, and then infecting them. Two fell screaming as a pair of their reanimated comrades broke their necks before roaring horribly as infection forms mutated them rapidly. Simmons grappled with a combat form, but the Flood form's unnatural strength was beginning to win out. It was a miracle he was still uninfected.

The Master Chief and the Arbiter both seized assault rifles from the weapons rack and opened fire, but the Flood was endless, replacing bodies as fast as they died.

A stocky combat form charged towards the Master Chief, and he saw in horror that it was a Brute combat form, the infection form nestled between its jaws, its left wrist hanging limply under the claw-like tentacles. He struck it with the hilt of the rifle, crushing the infection form and tearing the reanimated Brute into chunks of flesh.

"Ahhh!" screamed Reynolds, wrestling with an infection form. He squeezed it, and it popped, but another of the little bastards seized the chance to strike him in the back as the Sergeant turned to flee. The pod stabbed Reynolds in the back of the neck with its penetrator, and tapped into his spine. "No! No! No!" screamed Reynolds, falling to the ground as his flesh began to erupt in the greenish-gray skin of a combat form. Then he stood up and screeched in unison with the rest of the Flood.

A Marine promptly proceeded to attack the reanimated Sergeant.

"What are you doing?!" cried the woman who'd cried out earlier.
"That's the Sergeant!"

"That was the Sergeant!" replied the Marine grimly, pumping 7.62mm bullets into what had formerly been Gunnery Sergeant Reynolds until the infection form had burst, and Reynolds' corpse was too shredded to be used as a host.

Simmons, armed with a shotgun, was the only squad member who had managed to fight off the Flood, but was being backed into a corner by the infection forms. The Chief threw a plasma grenade, and it fixed to an approaching combat form, blowing it to pieces and shredding a group of infection forms. He turned as a new cluster of red dots appeared on the motion sensors, and tore apart a combat form with a burst from the battle rifle. He sprayed the infection forms with bullets before they could get to the Marines, popping them in explosions of putrid gas.

Beside him, the Arbiter wielded the human weaponry with such skill that the Spartan could swear the Elite had been doing so his whole life.

Finally, the continuous assault ceased, and the survivors reloaded and restocked their weapons.

Tossing aside his battle rifle, the Chief grabbed a shotgun, and grimly looked at the carnage around them. Dead bodies, infected and not, lay everywhere.

The Arbiter walked over to a human combat form, and brought his foot down, smashing the corpse into pieces.

"What are you doing?" yelled Simmons, charging at the Elite. Another Marine held him back before he could make the mistake of taking on the Elite.

"We must destroy these bodies," explained the Arbiter, moving onto a

Brute combat form. "Each one is a potential vessel for the Flood." His mandibles tightened in disgust as he smashed another infected Brute to pieces. "Quickly! Let us find their ship. Make short work of this abomination!"

The three Marines looked sick, but they all eventually nodded, and accompanied the Chief and the Arbiter into a building, where a lone Marine was running away from a horde of infection forms.

"Uhh! Get off me!" he screamed as they caught up with him.

The Chief opened fire, and the Arbiter followed suit after a brief hesitation, 7.62mm bullets barely missing the Marine. Eventually, the last infection form had popped, and the Marine stood crouching and ducking away from the bullets. His body armor and the accuracy of the shots had saved him from any serious injury, but he was going to be a combat liability.

"Simmons, get him out of here," ordered the Chief. "Signal a Pelican, but make sure that you're in a sterilized area."

"Yes sir, Master Chief!" replied Simmons. He turned to the shaken Marine. "Come on buddy; let's get out of this hellhole." He put the man's arm over his shoulder, and guided him out of the room.

The Marines that had been led by Sergeant Stacker that had accompanied the Chief and the Arbiter up to the Mantis were pinned down behind sandbags with more Flood combat forms surrounding the area. They'd been awaiting orders after Stacker had evacuated most of the wounded, when the Flood had swarmed them.

"Get 'em!" screamed the woman angrily, opening fire with her SMG. The few infection forms in the room shredded instantly from the caseless rounds. A pair of human combat forms whirled around and charged for her, leaping high into the air.

The Master Chief blew them out of the air with the shotgun, and threw a frag grenade into a knot of oncoming combat forms, shredding them into fetid meat. Beside him, the Arbiter emptied the assault rifle into a trio of Brute combat form with roars of fury.

But the Flood had infected some of the Marines, and they turned away from the food on display before them to a high-priority target.

Since when have the Flood been even remotely organized?, wondered the Chief as he threw a spike grenade that he'd scavenged from a dead Brute at the oncoming combat forms. The grenade hit a combat form dead center and ripped it apart. Shrapnel popped the infection form in the chest of another combat form, and it toppled to the ground. A stray infection form crawled into the corpse, and soon it had stood up again, only to be shredded by AR fire.

But the Flood were too close to the stairs that were the only way to the targets, and the Chief switched to the shotgun, and blew one, two, three combat forms to shreds. He stuffed another shell into the weapon and fired again, watching the infected Brute fall apart in front of him. Two more human forms charged up the stairs, stumbling under assault rifle fire from the Arbiter and the grim Marine. The Chief blew holes in them with the shotgun. Out of ammunition, he

switched to the assault rifle, and tore through another combat form with a hail of bullets.

The last Flood form fell under the Arbiter's assault rifle fire, and the four reloaded their weapons, gagging at the stench of the Flood.

The Arbiter approached the Spartan. "Spartan, may I take possession of your assault weapon?" asked the Elite. "Mine is spent, and I have no wish to soil my hands with _that _weapon," he said, pointing at a spiker that lay on the ground.

The Spartan tossed him the weapon. "Enjoy," he said, picking up the spiker. It would actually be quite useful against the Flood, heat seemed to work well, and the twin blades would tear through almost anything. He headed into the hangar, where two Marines still alive and clean huddled.

"It gets inside you, chews you up," whispered a terrified woman, her hands tightly gripping her battle rifle.

"We gotta get outta here," agreed the other Marine, white-lipped and trembling.

The Arbiter looked down the warehouse, where he could see swarming Flood. "Accursed parasite!" he bellowed, firing the assault rifle down at them. "Rise up and I will kill you! Again and again!"

Reaching the other end of the warehouses, the surviving Marines who joined the Chief and the Arbiter held position after clearing the area. Or rather, after the Flood depleted the Arbiter's shields, the Elite lost it, pulled out his energy sword, and proceeded to cut swaths through the combat forms, leaving the infection forms to the Master Chief and the Marines to kill before they could reanimate the combat forms or infect the Marines.

The Master Chief didn't blame the Marines for remaining behind. Having nearly fallen victim to the Flood himself, and with the scar on his neck to prove it, he wasn't especially keen on getting close to the infection forms.

Upstairs, two Marines, one wielding a flamethrower, tried to combat the Flood as well, but they soon fell under the tide of infection forms when the flamethrower overheated, leaving the flamethrower for the Chief to pick up as they headed up there, across a walkway and down a hole in the floor into the office areas. From what he'd seen before the Marines had been overwhelmed, it had been surprisingly effective at killing the Flood forms, and the Chief kicked himself for not thinking of when the Sentinels had helped him against the Flood on Halo. Their beams had worked in a similar fashion, destroying the bodies completely.

As he landed on the ground, the Chief's vision went dark, and he nearly dropped the flamethrower.

"Chief!" cried Cortana, appearing lying on her side in his vision. "I can't tell you everything...it's not safe. The Gravemind...it knows I'm in the sys-" she whispered before the connection dropped, and the Spartan's vision cleared.

The Chief and the Arbiter proceeded on, stocking up on ammo in the bunker before heading into the tin maze. The Chief discarded the spiker, and picked up an assault rifle, leaving most of the ammunition for the Arbiter to use. Seeing slight movement around the corners, the Spartan discharged the flamethrower, burning the combat forms where they stood. Three fell in flaming heaps, and another charged for the Chief, flesh being destroyed by the flames before it could reach the Spartan. The Chief let the weapon cool, and was about to round the corner when two reanimated Brutes charged at them. He opened up with the flamethrower, and the Flood screamed as they burned. The stench rippled through the Chief's helmet filters, and the Arbiter gagged as well, holding his breath until the spores had settled.

They quickly moved through the maze, and found a Marine huddling in a corner of the large room that had been previously used as an Aid Station, surrounded by three dead Marines. The Marine was holding a pistol, and was occasionally aiming it at his own head, before lowering it and burying his face in his hands. "I...I didn't have a choice..." he whispered. "The L.T...the Sergeant...they were all infected! I could see it crawling...sliding around beneath their skin!" he sobbed. "A-and then they got up...they s-started to talk! _Oh, God! Their voices_! Oh, God! No, make them stop! I did them a favor...y-yeah that's it; I _helped them!" he sobbed. "Maybe...maybe I need to help myself..." he whispered, before breaking down completely.

The Arbiter looked at the man in shock, and moved towards him, but the Master Chief grabbed his shoulder, holding him back.

"He's never going to make it out of here, even if we tell him to go," said the Spartan sadly. "I've seen this happen before."

"I am sorry," said the Arbiter in his deep voice.

With no time to spare, the Chief and the Arbiter continued on ahead to the lake bed where the Scarab had been previously fought and destroyed. The COM crackled as they emerged onto the grating.

"Hail, humans, and take heed," declared a thick voice over the COM of all the combatants. "This is the carrier _Shadow of Intent_."

The Chief and the Arbiter paused to see three CCS-class battlecruisers fly in formation as a larger assault carrier sliced overhead from Slipspace.

"Clear this sector, while we deal with the Flood," said the voice.

Five saurian figures clad in enclosed armor leaped out of landed Orbital Insertion Pods ahead of the Chief and the Arbiter, and began fighting against the Flood. They had snake like heads and necks, broad physiques, and bent back legs with two large toes on each foot.

The Elites â€" a claret-armored Major and four black-purple armored Special Operation Elites carved through the Flood. Their plasma rifles made short work of the combat forms, whether by quick blast or by swift melee strikes with the curved butt of the weapon. All of the

Elites wore assault harnesses, with enclosed helmets to prevent the Flood spores from taking root inside their systems and infecting them.

The Chief and the Arbiter made their way to the Elite lance, the Spartan hefting the flamethrower with one hand and picking off distant combat forms with the assault rifle until it clicked.

"Thanks for the help," said the Master Chief, throwing aside the flamethrower and his spent assault rifle and grabbing a spiker from the ground. With six Elites allying with him, he didn't want to kill them accidentally â€" despite past feelings. Besides, the spiker â€" effective at all ranges, would be an excellent weapon against the Flood.

"Major Usze 'Taham," said the Major. "Your thanks are welcomed, Demon."

"My brothers, I fear you bring bad news," said the Arbiter as the Chief tossed him assault rifle ammo.

'Taham snarled. "High Charity has fallen, become a dreaded hive!" he said.

"And the fleet?" asked the Arbiter. "Has quarantine been broken?"

"A single ship broke through our line, and we gave chase," replied 'Taham grimly.

The Arbiter's jaws fell open in shock. "But we had a fleet of hundreds!" he protested.

'Taham shook his head. "Alas brother, the Flood... It has evolved!"

Howls echoed through the air as a dozen combat forms leaped up the cliff, ready to tear the Elites apart.

"Ready your blades!" declared the Arbiter, igniting his energy sword. The other Elites did the same, and the Master Chief readied himself to strike with his spiker. The two sides charged, the Elites making short work of all of the combat forms in seconds, carving through them with ease and rendering the corpses useless.

At the other edge of the lake bed, a pair of bulbous figures waddled down the ramps. Flood carrier forms, seething with new infection forms.

"Stay away from them!" advised the Spartan. He opened fire with the spiker, the red-hot spikes puncturing the first carrier form and detonating it, releasing a dozen crawling pods. One of the Elites threw a plasma grenade at the other carrier form, and the grenade tore the Flood form to pieces and vaporized most of the first swarm of infection forms. The second swarm came towards the Elites, but a few bursts of plasma fire took care of that problem.

A Brute combat form loped towards them, firing a brute shot. The Elites threw themselves out of the way of the grenade, while the Master Chief dodged the grenade with a jump worthy of an Olympian,

returning fire with the spiker and puncturing the infection form, stopping the reanimated Brute in its tracks.

The Chief and the Elites thundered up the ramp, and into the next hangar. A group of combat form spotted them, and charged, firing spikers as they did so.

"Suffer the cleansing flame!" growled 'Taham, tossing a plasma grenade at the combat forms. The deadly blue sphere adhered to a combat forms chest and detonated, tearing it apart and crushing the infection forms in the chest of another three. The other Elites, weaving through spiker fire, kept up the pressure on the combat forms, and soon the last one was lying on the ground in pieces.

The Chief moved on, and the Elites followed, the Arbiter with his energy sword at the ready, as the Chief grabbed another spiker and filled both up with ammunition. He raised both weapons, and cautiously moved down the hanger.

Reaching the end, where walkways and staircases led to the door on the balcony above, the Chief was about to direct the Elites to the stairs when howls echoed through the air and the Flood again dropped into the room. The Chief immediately targeted the infection forms, the spikes popping dozens of the little buggers with ease, leaving the combat forms to the Elites. But the seven Elites were being slowly overpowered, and soon their shields began to flicker.

"Major, take this!" called the Chief, tossing him a green device. 'Taham caught it and activated it, and the green mist that spurted from the device recharged the Elites shields quickly. The Arbiter took advantage of the added protection to carve through the few combat forms still standing.

Another wave came through, rather oddly lopping back and down the stairs. The Chief was rather surprised at this spontaneous decorum, but took advantage of it to throw a pair of frag grenades and take out most of the Flood in a large explosion. Two optimistic stragglers emerged from the smoke, only to fall under plasma fire from 'Taham. The claret-armored Major snatched up another plasma rifle after the last Flood form had hit the ground.

The Master Chief searched through the wreckage, and pulled out a shotgun. He refrained from scavenging ammo to fill up his own shotgun, and instead passed it to one of the SpecOps Elites.

The Elite looked at the human weapon disdainfully, but eventually took it, passing his plasma rifle to one of his fellows. He knew how powerful the weapon was at close range, despite its primitive mechanisms.

Commander Keyes voice crackled over the COM as the Chief headed up the stairs to the door that the Flood had emerged from. "Chief, the Elites are looking for something. We didn't believe them when they told us."

"It's Cortana, Chief!" chimed in Sergeant Johnson. "She's on that ship! Find her - get her out!"

* * *

><p>On the bridge of the Forward Unto Dawn, Sergeant Major Johnson swore, and punched the wall in frustration. "Dammit!" he yelled. "Chief and the Arbiter are down there in that hellhole, and I can't do a damn thing to help them!"

"You'd be no good down there, Sergeant," pointed out Lord Hood. "All you'd be is food for the Flood."

"With all due respect, get real, sir!" replied Johnson. "The Flood can't stomach _this_ man!" he crowed proudly, slapping his chest. "I figured it out on Delta Halo â€" they can't infect me. Think it's my Boren's that does the trick."

"Boren's?" asked an ONI officer curiously. He stepped up to the Sergeant. "Sergeant Major, I'm going to have to ask you to come with me."

"Sod off, spook," replied Johnson. "You wanna dissect me? Good luck doing it in time to stop this. Besides, you spooks have mucked up the Flood once already because you thought that you could control them. So keep your dirty hands off me!"

"_This is no time for petty bickering, humans,"_ said the voice of the Elite Shipmaster over the radio. "_This is time for action,"_ he continued. "_We must deal with the Flood now, before your planet falls."_

"_The Shipmaster's right,"_ agreed Commander Keyes from her Pelican, on her way to the _Dawn_. "_I've seen what the Flood can do when they're coordinated, and the results aren't pretty."_

"So the Sergeant's off-limits," finished Hood.

The officer flushed, but said nothing after that, his thoughts wandering back to the report he'd seen of the Flood from Halo â€" the report that had mentioned nothing of the dark-skinned Sergeant now in negotiations with the Elite Shipmaster.

* * *

><p>Once the Master Chief and the Elites were outside again, a couple of Separatists Phantoms arrived, dropping off more Elite reinforcements to combat the Flood in the second lake bed.<p>

As the Chief headed for the heavy machine gun, a _new_ Flood form stalked past the Spartan, dodging the Elites plasma fire. Clutching his spikers, the Master Chief looked in horror at the monstrosity, with a dreadlocked head, oversized, frog-like legs, and short clawed arms. Then, moving away from them, it began to convulse and mutate. He fired the spikers, but they had little effect on the Flood form.

The Elites fired, but the plasma rifle blasts had little effect on the stalker form as it grew bigger, swelling to the size of a Hunter. In seconds it had become a Hunter-shaped behemoth, with only its dreadlocked head being similar to its previous form.

The Chief snapped out of his daze, and fired the spikers at the massive Flood form. The white-hot spikes cut into the tank-like behemoth as it lumbered towards the Elites. It displaced them with a

single swing, and though their shields saved them, they kept their distance after that.

So the Chief ran _towards_ the tank form, and kicked backwards off its face—or whatever that thing was. He kept up the spiker fire the entire time, tearing through it and causing a thick mucus-blood combination to spurt out of the wounds.

The tank form groaned, and toppled backwards, landing on the ground with a massive thud. The Chief panted, looking down at the Flood form. _They really have evolved_, he thought.

An Elite manned the heavy machine gun as the rest of the lance leapt down into the lake bed. The Chief followed suit after taking care of an Elite combat form, the snake like neck drooping uselessly down the back of the combat form, and the body being destroyed by the blades of the spikers.

"Hurry, Demon!" called 'Taham. "We seek the same prize. But our Ship Master will sacrifice all to stop the Flood."

The Spartan nodded. He fired the spikers at the oncoming combat forms, but the battle against the tank form had depleted the Brute weapons, and he could see the Flood flanking them on his motion sensors.

Discarding the spikers, the Spartan drew out the shotgun, and blew a hole through a Brute combat form as it raised its claw to attack an Elite. The Elite nodded his thanks, and then returned the favor, pelting a combat form with plasma fire.

The Arbiter was in a frenzy, and led a pair of Elites in a close combat assault against the Flood. The combat forms were helpless against them, and even in large numbers, the infection forms were sliced to shreds before they could even depleted the Elite's shields. The Elite manning the heavy machine gun was proving most effective, the heavy bullets holding the Flood back, blowing apart a carrier form and shredding the infection forms that it disgorged.

Suddenly a red dot appeared on the Chief's motion sensors, and he saw a shape leap from the edge of the cliff.

"Arbiter, look out!" warned the Chief, as he blasted another human form that had flanked them to pieces.

It was too late. An infected Elite, energy sword clasped in his hand, had jumped up the cliff and impaled one of the other Elites assisting the Arbiter on the weapon. Sprinting for the Elite, the Chief grabbed the fallen warrior's energy sword, and ignited it. He didn't use the weapons often — he was certainly no master — but they were excellent against the Flood, as the Arbiter had consistently proved.

With one powerful uppercut, the Spartan cleaved through the combat form. Up ahead, more stalker forms — which the Chief had decided were made from pure Flood biomass, anchored themselves into the ground and began to mutate. The Elite on the turret tried to take them out, but they were too well protected by the scattered crates. Two of the stalkers mutated into tank forms, which began to crawl on all fours towards the Elites, while the others mutated into _another_

new Flood form, this one looked like a pincushion, with needles made from pure Flood biomass protruding from the surface of their skin, and that same dreadlocked head.

The ranged forms opened fire, some from the walls, and others on the ground.

The needles bounced off the Chief's shields, but they were as deadly as any spiker rounds, and the Spartan weaved through them, dropping a bubble shield behind him to fall back to, before lunging at a ranged form and cleaving it in two. He ducked away from an assortment of projectiles and into the bubble shield just as his own shields fell.

By then the Elites had moved in, picking off the ranged forms with their plasma rifles. With two plasma rifles in hand, 'Taham was quite effective at destroying the living pincushions. The Arbiter dived into towards a tank form, cleaving through its head with his energy sword. The other tank form slapped at the Elite, and he barely managed to dodge the blow. Activating his active camouflage, the Elite faded from view, momentarily confusing the Flood, and allowing the shotgun armed Elite to blow a hole in the tank form's face.

Seconds later, the ranged forms dead husks collapsed to the ground, having toppled from the walls under 'Taham's plasma fire.

The Elites leapt down to the lake bed beside the crashed cruiser, where a group of combat forms were milling around. The surprise attack caught the Flood off guard, and they were soon lying in pieces due to the energy swords that every combatant now carried.

Spotting a gravity hammer, the Spartan tossed aside the energy sword and picked up the weapon. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw 'Taham bend down and pick the deactivated sword up, placing it on his hip reverently. The Chief remembered the attitude of the Elites when it came to their energy swords and briefly wondered if he'd offended the Elites before reminding himself that each Elite present had likely killed dozens of humans "including the Arbiter. There was no reason to feel _too_ guilty.

Infection forms swarmed around a corner, and the Chief tossed his shotgun to another Elite, grabbed an assault rifle, feeling the familiar curve of the weapon in comfort, and opened fire on the infection forms. They shredded, and the Chief saw the source "a tank form was crouching on the ground, spewing them from its mouth. He fired at the tank form, letting the Elites keep the infection forms away, but the calcium exoskeleton of the pure form was preventing most of the bullets from doing any damage. Two more tank forms lumbered towards them, followed by three Elite combat forms.

The Chief kept up the fire on the combat forms, but as fast as he and the Elites put them down, the infection forms reanimated them. Growling in frustration, the Chief pulled out the gravity hammer, and charged, smashing the massive weapon into the ground, and crushing infection forms in swaths, before smashing the bladed end into a tank form. Practically split in two, the tank form fell backwards, and the infection forms stopped emerging, allowing the Elites to put down the combat forms as they slapped at the Spartan's shields. The Chief

smashed another tank form, but it knocked the hammer aside in its death throes.

He looked up as the last tank form drew its massive arm back, ready to attack.

Then there was a sizzle, and the pure form fell to the ground, cleaved in two by the Arbiter's energy sword. There was a fire in his yellow eyes that even had the remaining Elites nervous as the Arbiter stood with the massive, burning hulk of the crashed Flood battle cruiser glowing behind him.

Up an incline, an ominous hole resided in the ship's hull, leading to the interior.

"I shall remain here," said the Arbiter. "We will let nothing pass." The Elites all nodded.

The Chief nodded back, and dropped in alone.

Inside the ship, the normal purple Covenant hues were covered in a thick, mucous-like membrane, with bits of metal periodically protruding here and there.

The Spartan felt his vision lengthen and his surroundings turned green as a multitude of voices whispered in his mind.

_"Do not be afraid. I am peace...I am salvation." _

The voices were heavy, and sounded of death, like a shifting nest of snakes.

The Chief shook his head to clear it. The voices had definitely been those of the Flood's Gravemind, the collective consciousness composed of thousands of assimilated corpses.

He knew that the Gravemind would not be here, but coordinating the Flood from High Charity. Nor was he surprised that the Gravemind had contacted him as it had, no doubt 'reassuring' those it infected that this was the right path.

The Chief walked through several tunnels, taking note of the bulbous growths on the walls. He decided to keep his distance from them, as they no doubt contained infection forms. After passing several dead Elite Ultras, he reached a larger room, and saw the remains of a large console, with an oval shaped device lying on it.

_Looks like as good a place to start as _any, thought the Spartan. He took a step forwards, only for his vision to be corrupted again as the Gravemind spoke. _"I am a timeless chorus. Join your voice with mine, and sing victory... everlasting!" _

Inside the central chamber of the Flood-infested crashed CCS-class battlecruiser, the Chief found Cortana in a small Covenant hand held memory unit. He tapped a button, and Cortana's holographic avatar appeared.

"Chief!" she cried.

"Cortana?" asked the Master Chief.

But Cortana was all business. "High Charity, the Prophets' holy city, is on its way-" Cortana's projection above the holographic unit flickered and then disappeared.

"Cortana!" cried the Chief sharply.

Suddenly, the Chief heard the humming of a Phantom's gravity drives, and a Phantom appeared over the open chamber.

The Chief turned and readied his assault rifle at it while an all-too familiar shape emerged from the Phantom â€" a spherical, steel-gray machine with one glowing blue eye. The Monitor of Halo Installation 04, 343 Guilty Spark floated down from the Phantom, which continued to hover overhead.

The Monitor took notice of the Chief and said in surprise.
"Reclaimer!"

Then, 343 Guilty Spark turned and unleashed a powerful energy beam before the Chief could react. The Chief braced himself, but the beam had gone straight past him â€" and connected with a Brute combat form that was charging up the slope for the Chief. The powerful weapon destroyed it in a single glancing hit, and the smoking monster fell, dropping its spiker.

Spark turned back to the Covenant device where Cortana had emerged from, and began to interface it with a beam projected from his central eye. Shocked at the Monitor's audacity, the Chief lunged forward and grabbed both the unit and the Monitor as Spark began to explain his actions.

"I must act quickly before your construct suffers any further trauma!" said the Monitor, but the Chief pulled him away from Cortana's storage unit.

"Wait," replied the Spartan angrily. "Leave her alone."

Spark protested. _"If we do not take this device to a safe location, somewhere I can make repairs..."_ and he continued to try to project his energy beam into Cortana's storage unit.

The Master Chief angrily wrenched Spark just enough to disrupt the beam and spoke firmly to the Monitor. "On Halo, you tried to kill Cortana. You tried to kill me," he said. If Spark's insane little processors couldn't figure that one out, then things were going to get nasty.

Spark began to protest. _"Protocol dictated my response!"_ he explained desperately. _"She had the Activation Index and you were going to destroy my installation."_ He turned his head briefly before remarking in an accusing tone. _"You did destroy my installation."_ The little AI lowered his body in what appeared to be his equivalent of looking at his feet in shame. _"Now, I only have one function: to help you, Reclaimer. As I always should have done."_

The Master Chief stared wordlessly at 343 Guilty Spark, and then slightly motioned to the Monitor with Cortana's storage device. Spark took Cortana's device away, shooting his beam into it, while the Phantom projected a Gravity Lift.

Spark entered it first and the Master Chief reluctantly followed.

The Chief looked out over the ruined city of Voi as the Phantom fled the crashed ship. Although clouds of dank spores obscured the surface, part of the crashed Flood-controlled cruiser was still visible, jutting into the clouds.

As the Phantom flew away from ship, arching towards the largest cruiser: the assault carrier _Shadow of Intent_, two CCS-class battlecruisers of the Fleet of Retribution began to glass Voi with their energy projectors.

* * *

><p>On the ground, the Flood that remained shambled among the ruins, looking for food to add to their consciousness. As a stray infection form crawled into a human combat form that wasn't too badly damaged, a beam of energy speared the broken puppet of the Flood, and a wave of energy rushed out from where the column of energy had struck.<p>

Anything that got caught in the blast was seared out of existence.

* * *

><p>Elite Ship Master Rtas 'Vadum looked out over the ruined human city as his ships glassed the area, thoroughly eradicating the Parasite. He gritted his remaining two mandibles in satisfaction as the Parasite that had brought such horror to him and the galaxy was burned into nothing, and he resisted the urge to caress the cauterized stubs of his left set of mandibles.<p>

The door opened, and the Major he'd sent down to assist the Spartan and the Arbiter, Usze 'Taham, stepped inside.

'Vadum turned to look at the Major with conviction. "Our mission was successful, then?" he asked.

'Taham nodded. "Yes Ship Master. The Oracle and the Demon recovered the construct from the Parasite's ship, and are on their way to our ship now," he said. "I guarded the entrance with the Arbiter until the call for evacuation was made." He spoke this with slight venom in his voice.

'Vadum nodded, and narrowed his eyes slightly. "Forgive my intrusion, Major, but the venom in your statement suggests that you are not happy with serving with the Arbiter. Do you care to explain your feelings?"

"There could be no greater honor than serving with the Arbiter, Ship Master," replied 'Taham. "My dislike was directed towards the Demon, and how we work with this killer of our kind!"

"As we are not a killer of his own?" asked 'Vadum. He looked out over the burning fields. "I have seen this sight on many human worlds and felt satisfaction that these opposers of the Great Journey were crushed. And then, to know that the Journey was false turned that satisfaction into guilt." He tightened his fist. "We slaughtered them

because of the Prophets lies, and now they can assist us in finding that stinking worm," he snarled. "The moniker of 'Demon' is yet another lie that the Prophets would have us swallow. I will refer to him by the name the humans call him by, the 'Spartan'. The Arbiter does so, and I will follow suit."

'Vadum looked out at the Forerunner Portal. Its fins were open and blue energy streamed from their tips to the open Slipspace portal drifting ominously above the construct.

The fighting on Earth had ceased â€" the Battle of Earth had ended with the departure of the Prophet of Truth's fleet through the Portal hours earlier.

Four vessels of the Sangheilian Fleet, including the Shadow of Intent, were gathered above the Portal.

'Vadum took this all in and turned to 'Taham. 'It is time to meet with the humans, and see what this construct has to tell us," he said. "Fortunately, the information brought by the Arbiter was hopeful enough that we could contain this infection with a localized glassing, rather than a planetary one."

* * *

><p>The Master Chief had never been inside an Elite ship without his weapon raised. It was a rather disconcerting experience.<p>

Inside the bridge of the _Shadow of Intent_, the Elites and the humans were gathered around a long holographic table, with the white armored Elite Ship Master that the Arbiter had introduced as Rtas 'Vadum was floating on a gravity throne at one end with his Elite attendants. The Master Chief and the Arbiter were standing by the middle of the table, and Fleet Admiral Hood and Commander Miranda Keyes standing silently at the far side of the table. All were silent except 343 Guilty Spark, who was bobbing at the center of the table and interfacing with Cortana's memory unit with his projector beam.

"Will it live, Oracle?" asked 'Vadum in concern. "Can it be saved?"

_"Uncertain," _replied the Monitor. _"This storage device has suffered considerable trauma. Its matrices are...highly unstable."_ He glanced at 'Vadum and Lord Hood in turn.

Hood spoke up. "Perhaps one of our technicians-

"That will _not_ be necessary," replied 'Vadum, cutting the Admiral off.

Coincidentally, the storage device had started to work again, and a holographic projection of Cortana sprang up.

"Chief!" she cried.

If Spark had had hands, the Master Chief was sure he'd have been clapping. _"Success!"_ he cried happily.

Cortana continued. "High Charity, the Prophets' Holy City, is on its

way to Earth. With an army of _Flood_." Cortana stopped at looked down. "I can't tell you everything," she said, waving her hand by her side. "It's not safe. The Gravemind...it knows I'm in the system."

Cortana's image flickered and stalled.

The Master Chief sighed accepting the reality of the situation, and he turned to 'Vadum.

"It's just a message," he said heavily.

'Vadum thought for a few seconds before gesturing to 343 Guilty Spark. "Let it play," he said gently. He could sense the attachment that the Spartan had to the construct, and it intrigued him, but for now, he focused on the task at hand. The Parasite was on its way in their former city-world. This wasn't going to end well for Earth.

Spark nodded, and then jolted the device with another beam.

The recording of Cortana continued speaking. "But it doesn't know about the Portal, where it leads. On the other side, there's a solution. A way to stop the Flood, _without_ firing the remaining Halo rings-" Suddenly, Cortana's skin lit up. She clutched her head, gasped in sudden pain and collapsed onto the "floor" of the spoke softly, her voice filled with agony. "Hurry, Chief...the Ark...there isn't much time."

Cortana's recording ended, leaving her staring with desperation at the Chief.

"I'm...sorry," said Spark, and the Chief was surprised to hear the sincerity in the Monitor's words.

"No matter, Oracle," said 'Vadum gruffly. "We've heard enough. Our fight is through the Portal, with the Brutes and the bastard Truth!"

All the Elites around the room (except for the Arbiter) raised their forearms and roared in agreement.

Lord Hood looked around and nodded "Fine," he said wearily. "We'll remain here. Hold out as long as we can."

'Vadum gave him a curious look. "Did you not hear?" he asked. "Your world is doomed." His seat descended, and the Ultra-armored Ship Master rose from the gravity throne. "A Flood army, a Gravemind, has you in its sights! You barely survived a small contamination," he added.

Hood replied quickly and angrily. "And _you_, Ship Master, just glassed half a continent!" he snapped. He waved his arm and added, "Maybe the Flood isn't all I should be worried about..."

'Vadum drew his head back slightly. "One single Flood Spore can destroy _a species_," he warned dangerously. "Were it not for the Arbiter's counsel_, _I would have_glassed your entire planet_" he snarled, clenching his hands.

Lord Hood angrily raised his fist at 'Vadum, but Miranda Keyes interrupted before they could argue further.

"Sir, with respect, Cortana has a solution," she reminded him gently.

"Cortana?" asked Hood. "Did you see her condition? How damaged she is?"

While Hood and Keyes argued, the Master Chief bent down and observed Cortana's pained, frozen figure, still collapsed on the holographic table.

"She could be corrupted for all we know," argued Hood. "Her "solution" could be a Flood trap!"

Keyes didn't back down. "We should go through the Portal, find out for sure," she said.

"What we should do Commander, is understand - clearly - that this is humanity's final stand - here - at Earth," replied Hood. "We go, we risk everything; every last man, woman and child. If we stand our ground, we might just have a chance."

"No," said the deep commanding voice of the Arbiter. Heads turned to look at the imposing Elite. "If your construct is wrong, then the Flood has already won," he said, gesturing towards Cortana and walking to stand by the Master Chief.

"I'll find Cortana's solution," added the Chief. "And I'll bring it back."

Hood sighed. "Earth...is all we have left," he said. "You trust Cortana that much?"

The Chief didn't hesitate. "Sir. Yes, sir," he replied.

Hood looked as if he'd aged a hundred years there and then. "This is either the best decision you've ever made or the worst. Hell if it is, Chief? I doubt I'll live long enough to find out which." Lord Hood turned, looked wordlessly at Miranda Keyes, who gave him a sad look, and then exited the bridge.

* * *

><p>Sergeant Major Avery Junior Johnson hefted another carbine in his arm and walked through the hanger towards some more Marines. Inside the Shadow of Intent's hangar bay, both the Elites and the UNSC were getting ready for battle, albeit warily of each other. While a Separatist Phantom drifted into the hangar on the far side, two M12 Warthogs raced to the Forward Unto Dawn's loading bay, drawing near a group of Marines clustered around some UNSC crates.

The Elites Phantoms had been painted in the same colors as the Pelicans to differentiate them from the normal Covenant Phantoms. Most found looking at the new green ships rather disconcerting, but Johnson liked the color change. It seemed more badass than purple.

At uneasy rest opposing the Marines was a scarlet armored Major sitting on a Ghost, along with a few SpecOps Elites. The Major's beam rifle was resting next to the Ghost.

Johnson, with his arm full of the "stolen" Covenant carbines brushed past the wordless Elites, stopping only to scoop up the Major's rifle. Having used one to great effect in the battle against Brute Chieftain Tartarus, he felt much more comfortable with such a powerful weapon at his disposal.

The Elites, resentful at this non-permitted collection, rose challengingly around Johnson.

Johnson ignored them and continued walking, much to the bewilderment of the Elites.

Nearby, a pair of ODSs were joking with each other when the Arbiter passed by, with an acquired M41 rocket launcher over his shoulder and a flamethrower in his left hand. The ODSs and a pair of nearby Marines watched the Arbiter in awe, when 343 Guilty Spark drifted through the Marines in tow behind the Elite, leaving a Marine speechless.

Johnson rejoined the Marines, and began to hand out carbines.

At the fore of the hangar, where a Pelican Dropship lay before the hangar's energy field, the Master Chief and Miranda Keyes stood at attention before Lord Hood, who looked at them grimly from the rear of the Pelican as the troop bay door shut and the Pelican took off.

Keyes glanced at the Chief wordlessly, and the two left, going off to their own business.

Hood looked out the canopy of the Pelican as it arced away from the gathered Elite Fleet as the _Shadow of Intent_ powered its engines and thrust into the Portal, followed by eight cruisers, a carrier, and the UNSC frigates _Forward Unto Dawn_ and _Aegis Fate_.

He grimly watched as the last ship disappeared to a place unknown. _I pray that you succeed, Master Chief, he thought, heart sick with worry for his Marines, and for his planet. His home.

****Wow. For one of the shortest levels in the game, this was a really long chapter.****

****I've tried to invoke the horror of the Flood, and I'm not sure how well I've done. I also added in some references to other materials to add some depth to this chapter.****

****This will be the last chapter for a while, I'm at summer school, and I also need to update my other stories, so I'll be rather busy. But this **_will**_**continue. You can count on that. ****

****Please, rate and review.****

8. The Ark

****Halo: The Installation****

I'm back! It took a while to play through the level enough times and to split these bits up, but it's finally here! The beginning of the big battle! But it was quite annoying sometimes, trying to get this done " especially with the terrible Marine AI. It's only ever good when you drive a vehicle, because they are very good shots.

The Ark

Blue-rimmed ripples of white light flashed in space as the Separatist cruisers and _Shadow of Intent_ carrier arrived at the other side of the Slipspace Portal.

A colossal structure was below them, shaped like the head of a flower, with a cross shape, and then another, smaller cross beneath it, forming an eight pointed star shape. The circle in the center could easily house a Halo ring. Ocean, desert and grassland covered the structure's surface, in the same manner as Halo, with massive cloubanks obscuring the structure's surface.

The Brute fleet straight ahead began to close in, with thirty powerful ships bristling with weaponry.

On the bridge of the _Shadow of Intent_, the crew looked over the sensors warily.

"Brute ships. Staggered line!" called an Elite Major, turning to Rtas 'Vadum. "Shipmaster, they outnumber us, three-to-one!"

"Then it is an even fight," said 'Vadum in satisfaction. "All cruisers, fire at will! _Burn_ their mongrel hides!" he snarled, slamming his fist onto the arm of his throne.

* * *

><p>In the Forward Unto Dawn, ODSTs and Marines boarded a Pelican with the Master Chief. There was no room or time for a hell-jump " something that the Master Chief didn't mind too much. The two ODST's were a tough-talking fellow, Kojo "Romeo" Agu and another silent type who was known as "the rookie".

The voice of Commander Keyes rippled over the COM. _"Truth's ship isn't taking part in the attack. He must've gone to ground!"

—

"Roger that, Ma'am!" replied Sergeant Johnson, hoisting himself up into the seat above Hocus. "We're on him!" He turned to Hocus. "Kick the door."

Hocus reached up and flicked a few switches, and before her, Pelicans began to drop out of the bay. Then their Pelican dropped out of the _Dawn_ with five other Pelicans total.

As they breached through the Loyalist Fleet, one of the Pelicans was shot and destroyed by teardrop shaped Seraph fighter-interceptors, but the rest made it through unscathed, and the two fleets began to engage each other.

As they entered the atmosphere, the Chief checked on Johnson and

Hocus in the cockpit, then returned to the back, where several Marines and ODS'Ts sat, readying themselves for battle. The Spartan could see the nerves in their faces, but there was a fierce determination as well. They knew that this was what the war had been building up to.

"We good, Hocus?" _ asked Johnson.

"_She's a little cooked, Sergeant Major... But she'll hold," _ Hocus reassured him.

The Master Chief reached into the weapons locker and pulled out a sniper rifle.

"Alright. Pop the hatch!" _called Johnson over the COM.

Sunlight flooded in as the Master Chief slammed a mag into his rifle. The opened hatch revealed a massive desert on the surface of the structure.

"That's some view," remarked Romeo.

"Enjoy it while you can, Marines," _ called Johnson over the COM. _"Soon as we land, we're right back to it. Priority one: Secure a landing zone for the Commander's frigate. Keep your eyes and ears open. We need all the Intel we can get... on wherever the hell we are." _

The Pelicans touched down on a rocky platform.

"Stand to, Marines!" _ordered Johnson.

"HOO-RAH!" replied the Marines.

"Go, go, go!" _ called the Sergeant Major.

The Master Chief and two ODS'Ts jumped out of the Pelican, while the Marines remained on-board. Another Pelican landed, dropping off two more troopers. As the team moved on, Romeo spotted what looked like the center of the Milky Way galaxy in the sky.

"Hey, check it out. In the sky. Is that-?" he asked in awe.

"Hey, focus!" snapped another ODS'T. "We got a job to do."

The group of Marines followed the Chief and the ODS'Ts. They threaded through a sandstone overhang, and took up positions behind some boulders on a ledge overlooking a Covenant encampment._

An ODS'T with a red armor trim, Gunnery Sergeant Edward Buck, turned to the Chief. "Chief, eyes on," he cautioned patting his assault rifle. "Got a good angle," he remarked as he led the team up the hill. "You take the first shot."

The Master Chief took a deep breath and zoomed the scope in on a crouching Brute Major with the 10x setting. The Brute was listening to a sermon that the hologram of the Prophet of Truth was about to give. The Spartan swiveled between the Brute and a pair of Grunts, and fired. A booming retort sounded as the bullet shattered the Brute's helmet, and a second shot sprayed a fine mist of blood over

the area.

Before the shocked Grunts could react, the third rookie ODST opened fire, headshotting three within a few seconds. Blue blood splattered the sand.

"Good sniping!" called Buck, pumping bullets into a Grunt from the ledge.

By then the other three Brutes had opened fire. The Chief ducked behind a boulder after emptying the clip of the rifle into another Major, and chucked a frag grenade over the boulder. There was a surprised yelp from a pair of Jackals, followed by an explosion.

A roar tore into the Master Chief's ears. The Marines cried out as a brute shot grenade sailed past, knocking several of them down. Another Brute, stripped of his power armor and berserk, charged down the half buried ring structure and up the path. Buck coolly whirled around and hosed it with 7.62mm AR fire, piercing its throat and dropping it in a wheezing heap. "How do you like the taste of lead?" he asked.

The Chief put three sniper rounds into the Captain Major, but he managed to get one last grenade volley off that drained the Spartans shields, forcing him behind cover, and killed a Marine.

The Spartan waited for the blue bar to fill up, and scavenged more ammo from a sniper rifle in a weapons case, and then threw the rifle to the rookie, who caught it with a nod. He proceeded to brain another Captain with a sniper round as it tried to track Buck.

The sound of bullets ceased as the last Grunts fell with high pitched screams.

"All clear!" called Buck. The squad leapt down from the rocks — only one of the Marines had died, but everyone had minor injuries. The Chief headed past the Prophet of Truth's hologram, and grabbed battle rifle ammunition and sniper rounds from the deployed weapons cases, and then tossed the rest to the ODSTs.

"My Dreadnought cannot rise," said the Prophet's hologram. "Even now it is engaged; turn death into war for this new world. Do not relent until the heretic ships are smashed!"

Buck reloaded his assault rifle, and then spoke up loudly. "We got more enemy contacts ahead, move out!"

The team headed through a cave, where the lights placed by the Covenant cast a purple glare over everything.

A Phantom was assembling a Mantis on the other end, with Jackal Snipers clutching carbines posted on the structure. A pack of Brutes and a few assorted Jackals and Grunts climbed out of the Phantom, ready to patrol the area.

"They're setting up an AA battery," whispered Buck. "That thing'll tear the Dawn apart... We'll wait for you to take the shot."

The Master Chief nodded, and directed Romeo and the rookie over to opposite sides of the half ring platform. The Jackals hadn't seen

them yet, so Buck and the Marine both took aim.

A squawk went up from a Sniper, and all five UNSC units fired. The Snipers fell in spurts of purple blood, and two Brute Minors and a Major hit the dirt facedown.

The Grunts panicked. "We're doomed!" they screamed. "Flee!"

The remaining Brutes charged, firing their brute shots. The Master Chief threw a plasma grenade down at them, sticking to one of the weapons. The Brute threw it aside, but unfortunately the weapon landed next to a knot of Grunts and Jackals. There was a flash of blue light and a piteous scream, and the Covenant soldiers were no more.

The Brute fell in a storm of AR fire, but the last pair had dodged the shots consistently. The Master Chief jumped down to the ring, pulled out his battle rifle, and fired three bursts as the Brutes launched grenades his way. One struck the Spartan's shoulder, and though the shields stopped most of the impact, it certainly left its mark. The bursts had torn open the Brutes armor, and another from the Marine put the Brute down. The last Brute threw a spike grenade, and though it missed, the impact from the explosion knocked both Romeo and the Marine down the edge and into the center of the rocks beneath the Mantis.

A sniper round from the rookie prevented the Brute from dealing further damage.

Suddenly the Master Chief heard the whirl of Phantom engines. "Get behind cover!" he warned as it deposited more troops uphill. He scooped up and deployed a cover, the blue energy field flaring out before him.

The Marine grinned. "We can take whatever comes around that corner!" he boasted.

A steel blue colossus rounded the corner, and charged. Romeo dived out of the way in time, but the Marine didn't have a hope in hell of dodging the Hunter's swipe. The massive shield shattered his bones and killed him instantly, launching his body into the wall.

"Hunter pair!" yelled Buck.

A booming retort followed before the Hunter could turn to Romeo, and the Hunter dropped to the ground, a sniper round having penetrated its exposed neck.

The other Hunter howled as it saw its bond brother fall, and swiped a crate out of the way as it headed for Romeo. The ODST had regained his footing by then, and ran for the cliff where a Brute Captain Major and a Lance of Grunts had remained. The Hunter pursued him, and the Chief fired twice, the rounds ripping into the worm colony that made up the alien, and it groaned, toppling to the ground from the trauma.

"Thanks man," replied Romeo. The Chief nodded, and tossed the sniper rifle to the ODST, and picked up the dead Marine's assault rifle.

Keyes' voice crackled over the COM. _"Chief, I'm giving the Brutes all I've got...but this is a heavy-weight fight! The Dawn's only got the tonnage to last a few rounds. Find me a place to set her down. Over!" _

Buck looked like he was going to chew Romeo out for not referring to the Chief as 'sir', but decided against it. "The area is secure, let's move ahead," he said. He waved the group over to the cliff, and they threw spike grenades up the cliff. Grunt screams echoed through the air, followed by three explosions.

The Master Chief and the team headed through the structure at the top of the hill. Coming out on the other side of the structure, they saw a burning Longsword roar through the canyon.

_"Thrusters are gone, I can't control it!" _cried the pilot in terror.

The Chief heard muffled rumble a few seconds later as the Longsword crashed, and bowed his head in respect.

A few Marines revealed themselves, Chips Dubbo among them.

"Flak got our Pelican too, sir," whispered Dubbo. "But before we went down, we spotted a good LZ. If we can get to our vehicles, we'll lead you to it."

The Chief and the others took look at an area at the bottom of the ledge they were standing on. Several Grunts and Brutes were guarding the crashed Pelican and the two Mongooses which presumably had fallen out when the Pelican was shot down.

The Spartan moved toward the Pelican, and heard twin booms as Romeo and the rookie opened fire. The two Brute Captain Majors went down quickly, and the remaining Brutes tried to rally the panicked Grunts â€" unsuccessfully.

The Chief stayed by the downed Pelican, picking up radio transmissions of the ongoing space battles above them, while picking off Grunts with the battle rifle.

_Hit them again! And again! And again!" _he heard 'Vadum roar.

_"Got a lock! Fox, Fox!" _yelled a Longsword pilot.

_"Negative, protect the Pelicans!" _ordered Keyes.

The Chief agreed with that statement â€" they needed all the help that they could get down there.

_"Now, close for the finish!" _snarled 'Vadum.

* * *

><p>In the cockpit of his Longsword, Lieutenant Graeme Hawk twisted and turned the fighter through the wreckage of a Covenant ship.
"Negative, get out of there!" he yelled into the COM.

_"Let your cannons roar," _declared the Shipmaster, before suppressing a snort. _"Broadside! What fools to face our guns!"

—
_ "Fire pods one through twelve. Archers away," _ ordered Commander Keyes to her bridge crew. _ "Two contacts at point two-three-eight!"
—

_ "Affirmative," _ said Hawk. _ "I see it..." _

The Shipmaster's voice interrupted him. _ "No, I will handle those myself." _

_ "Seraphs, on my six!" _ yelled another pilot over the COM.

_ "Stay away from those cruisers!" _ roared the Elite Shipmaster.

Hawk wasn't too happy about the split-lip ordering them around, but when Commander Keyes agreed, he had no choice but to follow.

_ "Understood. Engage those Seraphs!" _ ordered Keyes.

Hawk lined up a Seraph in his sights and fired the machine guns of the Longsword. The bullets drained the Seraph's shields before the teardrop-shaped fighter could dodge, and Hawk kept up the fire, puncturing the ship's hull and killing the Brute pilot instantly. _ "Scratch one, coming about," _ he said coolly.

_ "Let the Elites take care of those cruisers," _ said Commander Keyes.

_ "Full shields! Ramming speed!" _ boomed the Shipmaster.

Laser blasts began to strafe past the Longsword's cockpit. _ "Point laser fire, break off!" _ yelled Hawk, twisting out of range of the Seraph's fire

_ "I'm hit, I'm hit!" _ screamed another pilot, Joshua Dunn. Hawk finished off the Seraph pursuing Joshua before it could destroy his Longsword, but the fighter was in a very bad way by the looks of things.

_ "Watch your fire, watch your fire!" _ warned Keyes.

Joshua sighed. _ "No sign of the Elites, moving to the carrier. Goodbye, guys," _ he said.

Hawk's gut tightened. _ "All squadrons, form up! Form up!" _ he ordered. He was determined to give Joshua the time he needed to do what he had to do.

There was an explosion underneath one of the carriers, right at the energy projector. The impact of Joshua's Longsword in the primary weapon of the carrier had triggered a chain reaction that tore through the Covenant ship, detonating it in a series of violent explosions.

Hawk bowed his head for a few seconds and settled himself back into the fight.

_ "I give an honor for that kill," _ said the Elite Shipmaster, sparing a moment to honor the pilots sacrifice. _ "Suppress with me, point laser batteries," _ he said, back into the battle. _ "Forward lasers,

draw their fire," _he said,before remarking with relish _"...burn."

_

_"Affirmative, that's a hit," _confirmed Keyes, as they watched another cruiser explode in gouts of plasma.

_"They have been gutted stem to stern," _remarked the Shipmaster.

_"Look at it blister and burn." _

"Charge the MAC. Give me a firing solution," Keyes ordered the bridge crew.

Hawk spotted a Space Banshee and pursued it, tearing through it with the Longsword's machine gun fire. Tears ran down his cheeks as the ship exploded.

* * *

><p>The Master Chief flattened himself down in the rocks where the Marines were huddling. Two Brute Prowlers had shown up, and the Marines were engaging them with little success. The Brutes had gone down, but the Prowlers â€" basically Wraiths without the mortars, were proving very difficult to stop, pelting the area with plasma fire that looked to have no signs of stopping.<p>

The Chief sprinted for a dead Grunt, and grabbed its plasma pistol, overcharging it into the nearest Prowler. The silver armored tank slowed to a halt, giving the rookie time to snipe its gunner. The Master Chief took out the driver with a few well-placed battle rifle bursts, thankful for both the rookie's sniping, and the distraction that it provided.

One down, thought the Spartan.

The other Prowler (and the two Brutes accompanying it) was focused on the Marines. The Chief crept through the sand, and leaped out, overcharged the pistol into the tank, and leapt on top, yanking the Brute out of the turret and stabbing him in the neck with his combat knife. The Brute gurgled and hit the ground with a dull splat.

Turning in rage, the other Brutes fired their brute shots at the Prowler, sending it cascading through the air. The Chief leapt off just in time, and landed in a rather exposed position, his shields taking a large hit. Fortunately, the distraction had provided the remaining Marines â€" Dubbo, a woman, and the ODSTs â€" with the opening needed to kill the Brutes with some well-placed spike grenades. The Prowler didn't fare as well, and the Chief heard an explosion from behind him, the shockwave spiking his shields a bit.

"Mount up," said Dubbo, despite the fact that he was of a lower rank than most of the soldiers present. No-one argued though, Dubbo was known for his sensibility. "Let's find that LZ. Follow us sir, all the way down this canyon."

The Chief handed a rocket launcher to the female Marine, and hopped on the Mongoose. Dubbo and the three ODSTs boarded the Prowler, Dubbo taking the turret, and quickly figuring out how to work it, and Buck driving.

The two vehicles drove over the hill, sailed over a survivable gap, and down a sandstone slope. Buck stopped the Prowler for a few seconds, allowing Dubbo to destroy the two Ghosts on the rise with the Prowler's plasma cannon, and the two snipers to take out a Brute Captain Major, though he managed to get off one grenade from his brute shot. It sailed past the Prowler, and the Chief gunned the engine of the Mongoose just in time, avoiding the deadly projectile. The Marine sitting behind him took careful aim and let loose a rocket at a Chopper, blowing both the vehicle and the driver in half.

The three Grunts, helpless and remaining, primed a pair of plasma grenades each, and then ran at the Prowler, shrieking madly. Dubbo coolly hosed them with plasma, and there was a gigantic explosion of blue light as the grenades detonated. "Take _that_ ya bastards!" he crowed.

They headed up past the wreckage of the Longsword that had crashed earlier, which had evidently managed to take a Phantom with it. The few Grunts remaining by it screamed and fired their weapons â€" one Grunt Heavy having the surprising presence of mind to jump behind a plasma cannon and start firing. Dubbo returned fire as the bolts began to scorch the Prowler's silver armor, splattering the Grunt into the wall, while the rookie used an assault rifle to finish off the Grunts from his pontoon.

The voice of the Brute Commander echoed from the Phantom's radio _"Nooooo! Hit the Carrier! Kill the Half Jaw and his crew!" _he bellowed. _"Keep their backs at fraud. Drive the heretic ships back to the Portal!"_

And a few minutes later he roared._"Their cruisers mixed with ours! Watch your fire!" _The other Brutes must have hesitated a bit, because he soon snarled. _"Do not fear the Prophets' wrath, because if you fail I will have your hide!" _

The Chief headed into another canyon with a large Forerunner wall built in between the cliffs. The Chief led the Prowler around the left side, and blanched as he rounded the corner to see a troop of Grunts â€" and two were black-armored SpecOps Grunts, armed with fuel rod guns. A Captain Major also led them, but they all vanished in two explosions of flame from the Marine's rocket launcher.

She tossed the empty launcher off the back. "Can you get me to those fuel rods, sir?" she asked.

"No problem, Marine," reassured the Master Chief. He gunned the engine, and reached out, snagging the fuel rod guns from the ground. He handed one to the Marine, and removed all the fuel rods from the other, handing them up separately.

She grinned in thanks, and then her face twisted. "Whoa!" she cried, letting loose with the fuel rod gun.

Two Choppers had managed to dodge the fire of the Prowler, although one was in very bad shape. The Marine's wild fuel rod shots brought it down, and flipped the other Chopper into the rocks, wedging the Brute pilot's leg between the Chopper and the cliff.

The Spartan turned the Mongoose towards door of the wall â€"and

braked to give the Marine some steady aim. She let loose at a Shade turret and a Brute Captain Major, and then she too stopped at a shocking sight.

A fleet of steel-gray robots drifted from the doors, with two arm-like appendages, a central "head," and a curved undercarriage, with a laser weapon attached to it.

Sentinels, thought the Master Chief grimly. The Forerunner robots had tried to kill him several times under the orders of 343 Guilty Spark on the first Halo ring, built specifically to monitor Flood outbreaks " though both had had varying degrees of success.

Fortunately, they seemed perfectly happy to roast the living daylights out of the Covenant troops than pay attention to the Marines.

"Careful, sir! Brutes must've tripped a defense system," warned Romeo, as the last Grunt was burned to a crisp.

Sergeant Johnson's Pelican flew over the wall and hovered above them._"Ma'am, Hocus almost got her wing shot off,"_ said the Sergeant Major._"But we spotted a structure on the other side of this wall. It matches Cortana's description of the map room from the first Halo ring."_

_ "A Cartographer,"_ confirmed Keyes as the Chief looped around and down to the canyon leading to the next wave of Covenant undoubtedly waiting around the corner, ignoring the painful stab in his heart at the mention of Cortana._"Good. Should help us fix Truth's location. Secure the LZ, and we'll push through that wall." _

_ "Roger that,"_ said Johnson._"Follow my Pelican, Chief! The LZ's this way."_

The Marines and Sentinels followed Hocus' Pelican. The Marines were pretty nervous about the presence of the Sentinels.

"Tidy bastards," remarked Buck. "Hope they never decide to clean us up."

"It's like they don't even see us," said the female Private, clutching her fuel rod gun.

Buck shook his head. "Oh, they see us. They just haven't decided what to do with us yet," he said. His face twisted under his helmet. "Ghost!" he warned, as the purple one-man vehicle glided around the corner.

The Marine fired two fuel rod blasts, blowing the Ghost to pieces and propelling the Grunt Heavy from the driver's seat. Another Ghost chose the moment that she was reloading to zoom around the corner, and the Master Chief reacted just in time, twisting the Mongoose away from the Ghost, and driving up the canyon. The Ghost, ignoring the Prowler, pursued them, streaks of blue plasma whistling past their heads. The Marine twisted around and fired a fuel rod, flipping the Covenant vehicle wildly, exposing it to plasma fire from the pursuing Prowler.

"How 'bout that, Covenant scum?!" crowed Dubbo.

Leaving the Ghosts behind, the, they found two Marines pinned down by a large assault group of Covenant. Four Jackals, backs turned to the vehicles, kept up a steady rain of plasma bolts on the Marines cover.

This ended when the Marine on the back of the Chief's Mongoose let loose a fuel rod that sent all four aliens flying, and completely bewildered the rest of the Covenant. Buck gunned the Prowler and sent it hurtling for the three Brutes and the group of Grunts that remained, with Romeo providing small arms cover, tearing through a pair of Grunts with efficient, well-placed battle rifle bursts. Dubbo kept up continuous fire on a War Chieftain carrying a fuel rod gun, allowing the Master Chief to get close enough for the Marine to fire, finishing the Brute off. The Brute had managed to destroy the other Covenant vehicles, though, leaving only the Mongoose, the now extremely battered Prowler, and a Warthog.

"The LZ's through this cave, sir," said a stocky Marine. "Watch yourself; they've got Covenant heavy armor!"

The Master Chief dismounted from the Mongoose. "You two, come with me," he said to the new arrivals. They headed for the Marines Warthog. The Chief picked up the War Chieftain's fuel rod gun and handed it to the stocky Marine. "You ride shotgun, I'll drive, and you shoot," he said to the other Marine. He turned to the Prowler. "Rookie, I need you to take over on the Mongoose."

"Yes sir!" the Marines replied. The rookie nodded, and leapt off the Prowler, heading for the Mongoose.

"On my mark!" called Buck from the Prowler. "Three, two oneâ€|mark!"

The force headed through the cave and engaged the armor. The twin fuel rod guns made short work of the Wraith on the hill and the Shade turret beside it. Buck looped the Prowler around to the left, where a group of Brutes was arrayed along with a Grunt Heavy firing from a plasma turret in a sniper's nest. Another Grunt was doing the same from a nest directly behind the burning hulk of the Wraith.

For his part, the Master Chief focused on driving the Warthog, allowing both his gunners to dish out chaos among the Covenant troops. The gunner in shotgun destroyed the sniper nest, and then, as the Chief swung the 'Hog around, focused on the pack of Captains inside a thick sandstone structure. The Captains returned fire; their brute shot grenades only missing the Warthog by _inches_. Meanwhile, out on a sandy plateau, two Anti-Air Wraiths were filling the sky with fuel rod fire.

By then, Buck's Prowler had slain the group of Covenant troops in the second nest, and curved around the corner to distract the Captains. The Chief's gunner had destroyed one of the Anti-Air Wraiths, but the other had taken notice, and was now filling the air beside the Warthog with more fuel rod blasts.

There was a massive explosion as the rookie's Mongoose soared over the sandstone, the female Marine unleashing her fuel rod gun on the second Anti-Air Wraith. The gunner tried to bring the turret to bear

on them, but a well-placed round of Vulcan fire put a stop to that.

The last Brute Captain fell in a burst of plasma fire from the Prowler, but he got off one last grenade. Buck, Romeo, and Dubbo launched themselves from the Brute vehicle, rolled, and came up running as the battered machine finally succumbed to the damage it had taken and exploded.

The Master Chief pulled the 'Hog up, and jumped out, collecting fuel rod ammo for the Marines armed with the weapons. He picked up a brute shot to complete his own arsenal.

The Marines were ecstatic over the victory, and the female Marine cheered as the rookie pulled the Mongoose up by the Warthog. "We did it!" she cheered. "We lynched those Covie bastards!"

"That did it. LZ's clear," added Sergeant Johnson.

Buck nodded. "OK. Tell us what you need," he said.

"Commander? Bring her down," called Sergeant Johnson.

"Roger that," replied Commander Keyes. "Beginning my descent."

—

Dubbo squinted into the clouds. "Look! Up high! Here she comes!" he called.

"Is the Dawn rated for atmosphere?" asked the Chief's gunner.

Dubbo shrugged. "Guess we're gonna find out...hey! Take cover!" he yelled, sprinting for the sandstone structure.

"On Dubbo, Marines!" yelled Buck, following him.

The Master Chief and the rookie drove the vehicles into the relative safety of the sandstone dome as the UNSC Forward Unto Dawn swooped in dramatically, kicking up dust and sending the vehicles, corpses and debris from the previous battle tumbling and flying across the plateau with powerful gusts.

Commander Keyes' relieved voice cut across the COM. "Thanks, Chief. I wouldn't have lasted much longer up there. Come to the back of the frigate."—

"C'mon, Chief!" chimed in Johnson, as the Spartan drove the Warthog out from under the structure. "Let's see what the Commander has in her arsenal..."

The Dawn's hangar lowered, revealing three Scorpion tanks and a Warthog. 343 Guilty Spark descended as well.

"Did the Elites get a fix on the Cartographer?" asked Keyes.

"Yes, ma'am; just on the other side of that wall," replied Sergeant Johnson. "But it's surrounded by Brute heavy armor". —

_"Don't worry; I've got a plan," _said Keyes reassuringly._"If we can't fly over the wall, we'll go right through it. Chief, take one of the tanks, lead the way. If you find any locked doors, Spark will be happy to pry them open."_

The Scorpions and Warthogs rumbled down the ramp of the Hangar Bay, and Johnson's Pelican dropped off Gunnery Sergeant Stacker and a few of his Marines to pilot the vehicles

Spark nodded. _"I will certainly try my best, though I am unfamiliar with this facility." _

_"Alright then, you heard the lady," _barked Johnson.

The Monitor hovered near one of the Scorpions. _"Shall I help you choose a vehicle, Reclaimer?"_ he asked._"This one seems in very good condition, primitive armor notwithstanding." _

"A tank's a tank, light-bulb," remarked Sergeant Johnson._"Pick one, Chief. Get back to the wall. I'll help the Commander secure the Dawn. Then we'll meet you at the Cartographer." _

The Chief hopped in a Scorpion while the rest of the Marines and ODSTs mounted up.

"Mount up - let's roll!" ordered Johnson.

"Oo-rah!" boomed the Marines in unison.

No sooner had the echo of their cry faded, Ghosts and a Prowler poured in through the cave in the cliff.

The Scorpions immediately fired back. Explosions began to ring up around the cliff, and the Prowler was the first to go, flipping up as a tungsten shell punched a gaping hole in the vehicle.

_"Hey, how does 90 millimeters of tungsten strike you?" _roared Stacker.

The Chief fired the Scorpion's cannon at a Ghost. The Rapid Assault Vehicle exploded, parts flying off in all directions. The Marine sitting in the turret strafed another, blowing off the Grunt pilot's methane tank and bringing the vehicle to a halt. The Chief moved down the hill, past the burning hulk of the Wraith, and fired again, and there was another explosion as the targeted Ghost fragmented in front of them. Stacker's Scorpion took out another and the Chief heard the wild shout of a Marine echoing across the COM. _"Tank beats Ghost!"

_

A Hunter pair popped out from the cave, but the Scorpion took them out with no trouble before they could fire their assault cannons.

_"Tank beats Hunter!" _crowed the Marine that had spoken earlier. The Master Chief had to fight the urge to chuckle at his comments, reminding himself of the importance of the battle.

While the Scorpion's had travelled through the cave, a Phantom had set up a support tower. The Scorpions shot the Phantom down and the Chief destroyed the tower:

_"Tank beats everything! Oh, man!__I could do this all day!" _cried the Marine ecstatically.

The Chief actually _did_ chuckle slightly at this.

The Scorpions made their way back to the wall where a locked door prevented any entry into the Forerunner facility. Armor resistance of Wraiths, Choppers, and Ghosts along with various Covenant infantry were defending it, though not without opposition, as the corpses and Sentinel hulks strewn across the ground suggested.

As soon as the Scorpions saw the Wraith, they all fired, and the Wraith exploded, though it managed to get off a plasma mortar. The Choppers raced towards the Scorpions, taking advantage of their momentary distraction as the tanks dodged the mortar as best they could, the impact jolting the Master Chief's Scorpion up a few feet. He fired the massive cannon, and a Chopper exploded, while a Grunt fell from the back of its Ghost, minus its head, courtesy of the Marine in the Chief's Scorpion's turret.

The rookie, manning his own Scorpion, blew a Chopper in half. Romeo, somehow with rounds left in his sniper rifle, picked off a Grunt from the seat of his Ghost from his spot on the side of the tank.

Stacker's Scorpion blasted a Ghost to fragments, and pulled up at the lower door._"All armor, form up on the lower doorway,"_ he ordered._"Chief, get upstairs; have your robot pick that lock!"

—

Spark was a little affronted. _"I beg your pardon? I am 343 Guilty Spark, Monitor of Installation 04." _

Stacker cut him off. _"Yeah, well...you're also our ticket through this wall. So if you don't mind?" _

_"I will gladly aid the Reclaimer's progress," _said Spark.

The Master Chief drove the Scorpion up around the area's left side again, and fired at a Wraith as it emerged from behind the rocks. He pushed down hard on the throttle to avoid the plasma mortar, and fired again, generating a massive explosion in the Wraith, destroying it.

_"Reclaimer, come to the upper doorway, the others can take the lower one," _said Spark from beside the doorway.

While the Master Chief stormed the upper level, the other two tanks and other vehicles met up at the lower door, clearing resistance along the way.

With the top floor secured after a few tungsten shells, the Chief disembarked and picked up a Sentinel beam. "Take over the Scorpion, get it down the bottom with the others," said the Chief to his gunner, who nodded, and took the driver's seat.

Hefting the Sentinel beam the Chief followed Spark alone.

"Please, use caution; avoid collateral damage!" warned the

Monitor._"While this facility appears quite durable on the surface, no doubt there are delicate facilities below the facade." _He paused as he reached the large door. _"Odd, for a door to require such brute-force security protocols. One moment, Reclaimer." _

Spark projected his energy beam, and opened the door._"There we are. Please, follow me,"_ he said.

The Chief followed Guilty Spark into the Security Wall, while the Marines took the Scorpion down to the lower doorway.

Sentinels stared at him as he passed by. The Monitor opened another door, the escorting Sentinel followed.

Spark hovered over a pad. _"Here, this panel will activate a bridge. Allow your companions to cross below. Place your hand on the pad, Reclaimer." _

The Master Chief lowered the Sentinel beam, placed his gloved hand on the pad, and activated the panel. The bridge immediately lit up. The tanks and Warthogs moved across; Guilty Spark had another door opened for them.

"_Excellent. This way!" _said Spark happily. He looked at the Sentinels, studying their differences in behavior and the odd high security levels. After humming for a bit, he bobbed happily. _"Sudden clarity! These Sentinels were trying to deny access to the lower levels of this facility. A wise decision, given the Meddlers' preference for...destructive acquisition." _

Keyes' voice came in through the COM channel. _"Good work, Chief. Link up with our armor on the far side of the wall. Make your way down to the Cartographer." _

As the Chief continued on, the building shook and trembled violently. Guilty Spark opened the door with his laser, but as the Chief walked out, a massive leg slammed down, as a Scarab walked right over him.

_"Heads up, Marines!" _Johnson warned the Scorpions._"We got trouble."_

A Warthog with an M68 Gauss Cannon appeared from the rocky area before the Cartographer, so similar to the one on the first Halo ring. Ghosts were trailing and killed the gunner with a lethal barrage of plasma projectiles, his body falling limply to the ground, and splattered by the Ghosts. The Warthog driver angled towards the Chief and pulled over. "Sir, Hog's all yours! Let's hit that hostile armor!" he cried, hopping out and hoisting himself into the turret.

The Master Chief mounted up, and directed the Warthog back down through the rocky area, encountering vehicular and gun emplacements.

The Scorpions and Warthogs emerged from the wall._"All armor, form up! Hit 'em where it hurts!"_ ordered Stacker gruffly, firing the Scorpion's gun. A Ghost exploded as the shell punched a massive hole in the front.

The UNSC force pushed down the hill. Wraiths, Choppers, Ghosts and a Phantom fought the Platoon back.

"Target those Wraiths!" yelled a woman.

The Scorpions fired, taking out one Wraith and disabling another. The Chief's gunner fired the Gauss cannon, punching a small hole right through the Wraith. Plasma mortar material thundered on the ground behind them. The Warthogs made short work of the four Ghosts, ripping their pilots to pieces and flinging their corpses from the vehicles.

"First line, clear! Move up!" roared Stacker as the Phantom retreated before the Scorpions could take out its engines, depositing another Wraith.

The tanks moved on to the next line of Wraiths, assisted by Ghosts and other heavy weapons. The Chief's gunner blasted a Ghost, and the machine came to a dead halt, sparks erupting over its shell. The newly deposited Wraith began firing its plasma turret, and as soon as one of the Covenant sighted the armor of the Demon, they concentrated their fire on his Warthog. Of course, this just opened them up to the Scorpions, and three booms sounded, destroying both Wraiths, and a pair of Ghosts. Stacker's Scorpion then destroyed a Chopper, flinging the Brute Ultra pilot howling from the cockpit. "Second line: clear! Push forward!" ordered the Staff Sergeant. He saw a War Chieftain taking aim with a fuel rod gun, and fired. The Brute's shields and armor prevented his corpse from being mutilated, but his body was thrown several feet and ended up in an awkward heap.

The Scarab crawled down the side of the Cartographer building and onto the battlefield.

"Scarab's back! This time it means business!" warned the Chief's gunner.

Stacker took charge. "Bravo, flank and cover! I want everybody supporting the Chief; he'll take it down!"

The Master Chief moved in on the Scarab, while the tanks provided long range fire. A pair of Choppers tried to assist the Scarab, but the tanks had superior firepower, and blew them to pieces as the Chief drove under the Scarab. His gunner kept up fire on the Scarab's legs, while the Chief dodged both the Scarab's legs and the pair of SpecOps Grunts in a small building firing fuel rod guns at him.

Then he heard a final explosion, and warning signals began to sound as the Scarab lowered. The Chief drove out from under the Scarab, and headed for the back. His gunner took out a Brute Captain that had emerged to try and strafe them with his brute shot.

The Chief jumped up, planted his foot on the seat of the Warthog, and leaped inside the Scarab, his gunner scrambling into the driver's seat, and getting the Warthog out of there. The force on the hill had lost a Scorpion to the Scarab's main weapon, though most of the Marines had gotten out of the way before the Scarab could get them, and the Scorpions had wisely retreated behind what little cover they could find.

The Master Chief picked up a plasma cannon, hearing a sermon broadcast by Truth inside the Scarab.

"I opened the portal to this hallowed place, this shelter from Halo's fire, in the hopes that more of our Covenant would join us,"_ intoned the Prophet._"Alas, save for a rabble of Heretics and their Demon__allies, we are all that remains on this new world. So we must temper joy and sorrow in our hearts, for those who were left behind."_

The Chief coolly blasted a Brute Minor and Major with the plasma cannon, shattering their power armor, and scorching their hides. They fell with twin groans, dropping their spikers.

Dropping the plasma cannon, the Chief drew out the Sentinel beam, and walked up the ramp to the core. Two Jackals accosted him, firing their plasma pistols, and the Chief triggered the beam, blasting a continuous stream of amber energy at the gaps in their energy shields, knocking them off balance, and then firing the beam through their heads, one after the other. His shields dropped and attempted to recharge. Fortunately, there were no more enemies left to take advantage of that, and he emptied the beam's battery into the Scarab's core, followed by a spike grenade.

That did the job, and the Scarab began to shake violently. The Spartan fled before the Scarab detonated with a deafening explosion.

The _Shadow of Intent_was entering the atmosphere at extreme distance._"Not bad, Spartan," _remarked 'Vadum._"I saw _that_explosion from orbit. Truth's fleet lies in ruins. Find where the liar hides...so I may place my boot between his gums!" _

"_We'll know soon enough, Shipmaster,"_ Keyes reassured him.

The Master Chief headed up the spire, grabbing a carbine from a dead Brute Ultra.

"_Infantry on the spire! Mop 'em up!" _barked Johnson.

The Chief scoped out two Jackal Snipers, and fired a few carbine shots at each, dropping them before they could threaten him. The real threat was a Sniper with a beam rifle, and the Chief was only saved by the lucky deploying of a bubble shield to prevent the three Brutes that were attacking him from hitting him with grenades. They charged into the shield, one after the other " only to find three grenades, all primed and waiting. There was an explosion, and dust obscured the Sniper's vision, leaving him vulnerable to the Spartan's carbine fire. He fell with a splash of purple blood, dropping his beam rifle down the slope and into the Chief's waiting hands.

With 343 Guilty Spark following him, the Master Chief made it to the top, where Kilo 023 arrived with the Arbiter and two Marines.

"Well done, Spartan," said the Arbiter, nodding in respect.

343 Guilty Spark opened the entrance door, and the team entered the facility.

**I finished this while watching the rugby, and all I have to say is

GO THE BLUES!**

Sorry for the long wait guys, shouldn't be too long between this chapter and the next, and thank you for continuing to read this story.

Please review guys, cause you're all awesome!

9. The Cartographer

Halo: The Installation.

You at the barricade, listen to this! The rest of the Covenant sleep cause they're dead! You have no chance, no chance at all!

Okay, let's get serious now. This chapter will feature some more from the Arbiter's perspective. I think at the moment I've either started to get used to the combat being repetitive, or somehow it's been expanded, OR, I'm getting better at this. Hmm.

And thank god I can play multiplayer again without having a temper flare-up.

The Cartographer.

The Arbiter accepted the beam rifle from the Spartan. "My thanks," he said, nodding gratefully. The Spartan nodded back, and gripped his assault weapon.

They headed down a slope of gleaming steel, reaching the next door.

The Oracle started to open the door with his beam, but he seemed to have some trouble unlocking it.

"Hey, what gives?" asked ones of the human Marines in confusion.

"It seems I've...crossed a circuit," said the Oracle in surprise.

"Well, let me have a look," said the Marine, pulling out a device the Arbiter recognized as a "spoofer" and walking over to the door.

The Oracle swiveled to face the Marine and fired a blue laser at him. He yelped in pain and jumped back, dropping the spoofer.

"Oracle!" cried the Arbiter in alarm. He raised his weapon and walked around the Oracle cautiously.

"Little bastard stung me!" protested the Marine, rubbing his shoulder.

"I did not want you to come to any harm," replied the Oracle.

"You've got a funny way of showing it," muttered the Marine, attaching the spoofer to his belt and re-readying his assault

weapon.

The Oracle got back to work, and this time, he succeeded in opening the door. _"Excellent! This way," _he chimed.

Six Unggoy were sleeping in the next room, while a Jiralhanae Captain was urinating in a corner of the room.

The team decided to take the stealthy approach.

"Slothful runts," muttered the Arbiter in disgust. "Kill them as they sleep."

"Chief, tap 'em out," whispered a Marine. He pulled out a combat knife, and stabbed a Grunt Major in the neck, covering its mask. The Arbiter bashed another two over the head, caving their skulls in. The Spartan went for the, as he had heard the humans say "old-fashioned" approach and bludgeoned two with his carbine in quick succession. The last had noticed the bloodshed, but the Spartan put him down with a quick burst.

That got the Captain's attention, and he turned around, and yanked out his brute shot " but the Arbiter had dodged behind him, and ran him through with his energy sword. The Brute roared in agony, the life draining out of him.

"Come, Reclaimer. All you seek is close at hand," said the Oracle to the Spartan.

The team quietly made their way down to the second part of the facility; the Arbiter encountered a Grunt walking next to a stack of plasma batteries. He killed the Grunt quietly with a single beam rifle shot.

They headed quietly into the next room where a bunch of Grunts were sleeping and a Brute Captain Major was patrolling on a ramp on the top of the room.

The Arbiter sighted the Brute down the sights of the beam rifle, and the two Marines and the Spartan began systematically assassinating the Grunts in their sleep. There were still two left when the Brute saw what they were up to, and he fired his brute shot. The Marines dodged just in time, but the Spartan took the full force of the grenade, flinging him backwards into the wall.

The Arbiter and the Marines all gaped in shock. "The Chief's dead!" one of them cried.

The Arbiter turned his attention back to the fight, and put the Jiralhanae down with two headshots from the beam rifle.

Then he heard a shifting sound, and the Arbiter looked as the Spartan picked himself up heavily, shaking his limbs and straightening his joints.

"Chief! Sir, you okay?" asked the Marines.

"Been better," replied the Spartan wryly. He picked up his assault weapon, and tossed aside the dead invincibility device that had saved his life. The Arbiter had seen its make before, used by the Chieftain

of the Jiralhanae, Tartarus on the second Ring.

"Are you well, Spartan?" asked the Arbiter, in genuine concern, though it had been a short time since they had met, let alone begun to treat each other as allies.

"Your goal is just below!" _said the Oracle happily, relieved that the Spartan was alive.

On the third level down, a Brute spotted them and the team was forced to engage the room full of Covenant as it came to life. The Arbiter gladly took the left route, throwing a plasma grenade at a Brute Minor and Ultra. The grenade stuck to the Major and detonated, killing him and badly wounding the Ultra, shattering his armor. The Arbiter brought up the beam rifle and fired, causing a mist of vaporized brain matter to shoot out of the Brute's ears. The Elite threw the beam rifle to a Marine, who caught it gratefully, and grabbed the dead Ultra's carbine. The Spartan threw his own across the room to the Arbiter, and drew out his assault weapon, pumping bullets into a Grunt and splattering blue blood across the floor, before whirling around to take care of a pair of Jackals with a spike grenade.

A Captain Ultra threw down a bubble shield down to shield himself after tossing a spike grenade at the Marines, and urged a trio of Grunts out into the open. The Arbiter picked them off with carbine fire, and activated his active camouflage. While the Spartan distracted the Captain Ultra with plasma rifle fire, the Arbiter stealthily stole behind the Captain Ultra, and ignited his energy sword. He slashed with the weapon, and the Jiralhanae turned in time for the weapon to spill his guts all over the floor. The Arbiter finished him off with an uppercut to the face.

With the room clear, they headed outside. A terminal to the Cartographer sat at the ledge.

"The Cartographer!" _said the Oracle happily._"Come, it awaits your approval."_

The Arbiter kept watch, while the Spartan placed his hand on the terminal and activated the Cartographer.

* * *

><p>The Chief and Guilty Spark approached the Cartographer, while the Arbiter, carbine at the ready, checked the balconies behind the hologram. Upon activating the Cartographer, a holographic projection of the Milky Way appeared above it.<p>

Even the Master Chief was surprised at what the hologram showed. "That's...our galaxy," he said with a hint of awe. "We're beyond the rim."

"Two to the eighteenth light years from galactic center, to be precise," _added 343 Guilty Spark.

The hologram changed to a map of the flower-shaped structure they were on.

"What is this place?" asked the Master Chief, looking around.

"The Ark," replied Spark.

That caught the Spartan off guard. "_This_ is the Ark?" he asked in surprise.

Spark obviously shared this surprise. "_I always assumed it was part of a... _Shield_installation, but it seems I was mistaken."_

"That's a first," remarked the Chief sarcastically.

Guilty Spark turned around and looked at the Master Chief. "_Not at all,"_ he said. "_While I had a complete understanding of Installation 04, my makers wisely limited my knowledge of all other strategic facilities." _The little AI moved up towards the center of the map. "_Compartmentalization - in case I was ever captured by the Flood," _he added, turning back to the Chief.

The Master Chief saw the logic in that " it was a very real possibility. The Gravemind had captured 2401 Penitent Tangent, the Monitor of Delta Halo, and had been able to manipulate the teleportation grid after doing so. Even that was powerful knowledge, something only Cortana had been able to achieve.

The Spartan ignored the lump forming in his throat and got back to business. "Can you tell me where we are, exactly?" he asked.

"Here!" Spark replied, highlighting an area on the hologram.

"And Truth?" asked the Chief.

"Near one of the Ark's superluminal communication arrays, I'm afraid," admitted the Monitor. "_Unfortunate; the Meddler has triggered a barrier; a defensive perimeter around the Ark's core."

—

In the distance, two Covenant Banshees with a Phantom flew by the Cartographer.

The Arbiter gave the Chief a concerned glance.

Keeping his mind focused on the info at hand, the Master Chief walked further around the hologram.

"The barrier will be difficult to disable..." remarked Spark. "_How odd that my makers would place such a comprehensive defense around a single " he_ paused in shock. "_Oh my."_

"What is it?" asked the Master Chief, worried at the urgency in the Monitor's tone.

Before Spark could answer, the call of the Arbiter split the air.

"Phantom!"

A Loyalist Phantom approached the Cartographer " and it knew they were there.

The Arbiter and the Chief moved into position to fight the approaching Covenant ship, as 343 Guilty Spark continued to hover, deep in thought.

"Spark! Move!" called the Master Chief, dodging behind a ledge.

The Monitor finally noticed the Phantom, and flew towards the Chief as the Arbiter engaged the Covenant ship from the ground. The Phantom returned fire, but the Arbiter put one of the gunners out of commission with carbine fire quite quickly, evening the fight out a bit.

"We must get past that barrier! Or the Meddler will destroy it all!" cried Spark as he reached the Chief.

The Spartan's blood ran cold â€" the Monitors statement could only mean one thing.

"Chief, you got a whole mess of hostile air inbound," warned Sergeant Johnson over the COM. "Get back inside while we take 'em out."

One of the Banshees made a slow attack run on the Arbiter, foolishly trying to get close and splatter him.

"Follow the Oracle, Spartan," said the Elite. The Arbiter boarded the Banshee, killed the Brute pilot and took control of the vehicle. "I will help your Sergeant clear the sky."

The Arbiter's Banshee intercepted the Phantom, which broke off and retreated, the Arbiter giving chase.

Chips Dubbo dashed into the room â€" more Marines had arrived. "Sir, Pelicans are gonna land...one level down!" he said.

As the Chief headed back into the room, the female Marine guarding the door was killed by a plasma grenade. The Chief and his fellow Marines headed into the room, where three Captains and several runts and Jackals were being led by a War Chieftain holding a strange oversized revolver â€" a mauler.

Dubbo had commandeered the beam rifle, and was picking through the Grunts easily, so the Master Chief focused on the Brutes, who were throwing down all manner of cover and bubble shields, along with a regenerator by the War Chieftain, all to protect themselves. The Chief picked up a brute shot and fired a belt in quick succession, killing one Captain, and wounding a Captain Major, staining his golden armor with blood. Dubbo finished him off with a few magnum shots.

Throwing aside the spent Brute shot, the Chief seized two spikers, and unloaded the clips into the War Chieftain, cutting down his shields and wearing through his armor. The regenerator shattered under the barrage, and the War Chieftain reeled, throwing a radar jammer, and caking the Spartan's motions sensor with red dots. He ignored them, placing his life in the hands of the Marines as he stayed close enough for the spikers to do their job, but far away enough that the Brute couldn't get at him with the mauler. The War Chieftain staggered, and toppled to the ground, dropping the mauler and a glowing orange cylinder.

The Chief scooped up the cylinder and the mauler, heading down to the next level where a Brute Major charged into the open from the door, firing his spiker. Before the Chief could return fire, he retreated back indoors.

The Spartan followed him down cautiously, took one step through the door, and the Brutes opened fire. The Chief threw himself backwards and away from a spike grenade, the explosion dropping his shields and causing the warning light to flare red. He threw the orange cylinder at the two closest Brutes, including the Major that had lured him in, and the cylinder exploded into flames that engulfed the Brutes in roaring flames. They screamed and writhed horribly as they were barbecued, and the rest of the Brutes charged with a roar.

The Master Chief would have appreciated another incendiary grenade, but that wasn't an option, so he made do with a plasma grenade, priming it and hitting a Captain dead center. The Captain roared, there was an explosion, and the Brutes behind him were painted with blue-spotted red blood.

As the Brutes closed in, the Chief switched to the mauler. It might have seemed like an oversized pistol, but it had stopping power almost equal to a shotgun, and the large slugs blew holes in the Brutes as they tried to get close to the Chief.

A pair of Grunts each primed plasma grenades, and charged at the Spartan, screaming, grenades bonded to their hands. The Chief pulled up the assault rifle, and put the lead Grunt down with a long burst to the head. The Grunt's grenades exploded, taking out the second Grunt with another explosion.

The Marines moved in, cutting down the Covenant with suppressed fire. A Brute Captain Ultra kept up brute shot fire, but he was torn between killing the Marines and keeping the Chief occupied â€" and sitting on the fence wouldn't do him any good. The Chief simply poured on the AR fire, and when the combination of the Master Chief's and the Marines firepower cracked his armor, Dubbo nailed him between the eyes with the beam rifle.

They scooped up weapons, grenades, ammunition and equipment, before charged down the incline to the lower level.

A Brute Chieftain with a gravity hammer was on the bottom floor of the lower level, apparently alone.

"Protocol dictates action," _muttered Spark to himself as the Chieftain saw them._ "The Installation was my responsibility, if my suspicions are correct...no! I must not jump to conclusions." _

"The pack will _feast_ on you!" snarled the Chieftain, before running off outside.

The Marines cheered. "Bastard knows he's gonna die!" cheered Dubbo. "We've got 'em on the run!"

The Master Chief was still wary. For all their seeming stupidity, Brutes weren't _complete_ idiots, especially their Chieftains.

His suspicions were proven when his enhanced eyes picked out a slight

shift, almost like a heat-wave. His first thought was that the Arbiter had landed his Banshee below and was coming to rejoin them, but there would have been a warning, and the Elite would have likely stayed to take out the Brutes on the bottom.

He lined one of the moving patches up, and opened fire. A Brute's howl ripped through the air as the Chief's bullets took down his shields and shredded his flesh. He became visible as he fell to the ground, grey armored with a triangular helmet that had a red light in the center.

Red dots began to cloud the Master Chief's motion sensors, and he waved the Marines back.

Brute Stalkers, thought the Chief. The specialists weren't very durable, chosen for their stealth " or at least as stealthy as Brutes could get, but their techniques could overwhelm unprepared foes within minutes, using their active camouflage and radar jammers to conceal themselves.

An incendiary grenade hit the ground where the Chief had been standing seconds earlier, and the caesium mix inside the grenade began to splash out and burn. Plasma bolts began to ripple through the air as the Stalkers fired the weapons at the Marines. All they could do was toss a few grenades and hope they hit something, as the Brutes were quite keen on keeping up the wall of fire on from of them.

The Spartan backed the Marines all the way up, and handed them a few grenades. "Stay here," he said.

"What's the plan sir?" asked Dubbo.

"Cover me," replied the Chief. "I'm going to jump that firewall."

"But what if you can't do it sir?" asked the Marine with the spoofer.

"I can," said the Chief, before the other Marines could chastise him.

Then the Master Chief sprinted down the ramp, and activated a regenerator. He held onto the device as he jumped over the flames, keeping his shields relatively unharmed, and hit the ground with a perfectly timed roll, springing forward and tackling an invisible Brute. He slammed the mauler into it, the small blade puncturing the Brute's armor and eventually, his throat. He scooped up the Brute's own mauler and fired at a blur, and another Stalker dropped into visibility with an agonized howl.

The last stupidly kept his position revealed by trying to hose the Chief's shields down with his plasma rifle, and the Spartan dodged the shots, closed in on him, and fired both maulers, tearing apart his chest.

The Marines headed down the ramp as Sergeant Johnson's voice crackled through the COM.

_"Hang tight, Chief! We're on our way!" _reassured Johnson.

* * *

><p>Brute Bodyguards gathered around Brute Chieftain Herodotus as the Demon entered the room, followed by the Heretics and the Oracle.<p>

"You must win this fight on your own," ordered the Prophet of Truth over the battlenet. "Failure will bring a fate worse than death - abandonment, as we speed forward on the Journey."

Herodotus nodded, and turned to the Demon as it walked down the ramp towards him, assault weapon raised.

"Fight me, I'm right here!" roared Herodotus, lifting his hammer and charging.

The Demon opened fire with his assault weapon, the bullets pinging harmlessly off Herodotus' shields. He allowed the Demon to bring his shields down, and then activated the invincibility device. Blue lightning surrounded him, and he charged for the Demon, swinging his hammer. The Demon cut away with fantastic speed, agilely dodging the Herodotus' swings. He ran towards the Brute and kicked off his face, backflipping several feet away from the Chieftain.

Herodotus cursed, and swung again. This time, though the blow did not kill him, it sent the Demon flying. Ignoring the shots from the humans, Herodotus charged again, and slammed, but again the Demon rolled away, just as the Chieftain's invincibility broke out.

Herodotus was about to charge again and stepped on a small section of floor that seemed different from the others. He looked down in shock to see that he had stepped on a trip mine, and leaped, the explosion dropping his shields and damaging his armor.

The Demon was there to meet him, grabbing the handle of Herodotus' gravity hammer and pushing back against the Brute. Herodotus snorted and resisted with his full strength, pushing the Demon back. Then the Demon swung around and behind the Brute, and Herodotus roared angrily as a beam rifle blast sizzled past his head. He raised the hammer " and then saw the plasma grenade bonded to the handle.

Herodotus roared as he realized he'd been suckered, and brought the hammer down. The Demon jumped out of the way again, and the grenade went off, almost knocking the weapon into the Brute's own face. The Demon now fired his assault weapon, and ran backwards to the ramp it had come down, and Herodotus' wounds were taking its toll. He nearly stumbled as he leapt up the ramp and slammed the gravity hammer down, missing the Demon, but killing one of the humans.

Herodotus licked his lips as he smelled blood, and swung again, knocking weapons cases into the humans. Then he realized that he couldn't see the Demon, and felt a powerful blow at the base of his spine. He bellowed in agony and swung with a backhand, missing the Demon by inches as it ducked with that fantastic speed. Its fist shot out, one of their own maulers in its grasp, and it fired two shots at the Brute's thick neck.

Herodotus saw darkness begin to claim him, and reached out and

grabbed the Demon by the neck.

"Our Journey begins now!" he howled, tightening his fist as he collapsed.

* * *

><p>The Master Chief pushed the Brute Chieftain's corpse off himself. These encounters were never fun, and he'd never felt so outmatched in terms of sheer physical power. As soon as the Chieftain had fallen, the other Brutes and two Jackal Snipers had sprung into action. With the Marines providing distant fire, the Chief grabbed a carbine and opened up, taking out a Sniper quickly, leaving the other one for Dubbo. Two Stalkers charged, fading into the background, while the Bodyguards opened fire with their spikers. The Chief emptied the rounds into one Bodyguard, knocking off his helmet and fatally poisoning him, and reloaded quickly. He heard a rushing sound as five Jump Pack Brutes soared into the fight, and tracked one with the carbine, blowing its pack to pieces and sending it plummeting.<p>

The Marines took out a second Jump Pack Brute before focusing on the Stalkers, both armed with plasma rifles. The Chief kept moving, avoiding the carbine projectiles from the Jump Pack Brutes, and took out another with a few headshots. He caught the fourth one out with an excellent plasma grenade, the parts raining down on the harried Brute bodyguards, and seized the moment to throw a spike grenade at them. Spiker shots dropped his shields down, and the Chief dodged and weaved, expecting death to claim him at any second, but refusing to make it easy for them.

Finally, the last Bodyguard dropped to the ground in a heap, and the Chief and the three Marines that had survived regrouped.

"ETA: damn quick!" called Johnson. _"Standby for pickup!"_

Upon meeting at the extraction point with Johnson, waiting in a Pelican, a massive flock of Sentinels rose up.

Alarmed, the Chief raised his weapon. "Commander!" he warned.

"Johnson! Look sharp!" warned Keyes.

"I got it!" Johnson reassured them, spinning the Pelican's machine gun.

"No, don't shoot! They mean us no harm!" protested 343 Guilty Spark. _"Those units have a priority task."_

Slightly annoyed, Johnson replied. "Oh, yeah? And what might _that_ be?"

"I really can't say... not for sure," admitted the Monitor as a Sentinel came tentatively up to the Master Chief and inspected him. _"But if you allow me to find a terminal closer to the Core-"_

"No, Oracle," interrupted the Arbiter from his stolen Banshee. _"We must keep the Prophet of Truth firmly in our sights."_

Meanwhile, the Sentinel closed back up and rejoined the flock.

Spark still protested. _"But what about your construct? Her solution to the Flood? With more data, I-" _

Keyes interjected. _"The Arbiter's right. We have priorities too. Until we kill Truth, stop the Rings from firing..."_ she paused as the Chief entered the Pelican bay. _"...nothing else matters."_

The flock of Sentinels sped off, with the Pelicans in trail.

****That battle between the Chief and Herodotus was partially inspired by the clash shown between a Spartan II and a Brute Chieftain in the opening of Halo 4. ****

****Writing this short section took a long time, as I was a bit fuzzy on the memories of these bits. So just imagine how long the Covenant levels would take. I shudder at the thought. ****

****Nah, of course I don't.****

****Please review, everyone!****

10. The Covenant Part 1

****Halo: The Installation.****

****This is it. The biggest level in the trilogy, and possibly one of the best. Or at least, the first part, anyway. Hopefully I can ramp up the awesomeness for this level in all accounts â€" the fighting, the tactics, the cutscenes â€" everything.****

****And to the Guest who pointed out rightly that Johnson's Flood immunity is as a result of his Spartan-I augmentations, not Boren's syndrome, the official cover-up, the reason Johnson claims that it was Boren's is because there are bridge staff present that aren't cleared to know about the Spartan-I project. The ONI officer would have been privy to such information about the cover-up, and as officially, Johnson is the only survivor of "Boren's" the officer would have known what he was talking about. Johnson's response is a callback to Halo: First Strike.****

The Covenant

A giant ocean stretched across the surface of the Ark, ending a short distance before a beach leading to the Cartographer-shaped Citadel, an angular grey structure shaped like a triangle.

Five Pelicans swooped in, followed by two Separatist Phantoms, with the Sangheili assault carrier Shadow of Intent behind them. A large energy barrier surrounded by Covenant Loyalists protected the Citadel â€" and the Prophet of Truth, with three tall towers with blue pillars of energy erupting out of the peaks.

Commander Keyes was piling 343 Guilty Spark for information. _"We hit these three generators, and the barrier will fall?"_ she asked to confirm.

_ "A small section, yes," _replied Spark.

Down on the beach, a Grunt spotted the flight formation as it approached the mainland, jumped, and cowered.

_ "Good enough," _said Keyes._ "Johnson, drop the Chief at the first generator, then head to the third. The Elites will punch right down the middle." _

_ "Roger that," _replied Sergeant Johnson.

The Pelicans and Phantoms broke formation, two Pelicans heading for the tower on the left, and two, including Hocus' bird carrying the Master Chief, headed towards the one on the right. Anti-Air Wraith fire erupted around them.

_ "Charlie Foxtrot! Tower One approach has active Triple-A!" _warned Hocus as the bay door of her Pelican opened, revealing the Warthog hanging down. The Master Chief stood in the bay, battle rifle slung across his back.

He was just in time to see fuel rod fire hit one of the engines of the following Pelican, forcing it to collide into Hocus' Pelican, tossing the Warthog it carried out onto the ground. The second Pelican swerved out of control.

_ "Mayday! I can't control her!" _cried the pilot as the Pelican dropped out of sight, followed by the sound of a crash and a muffled explosion.

_ "Pelican down! Pelican down!" _yelled Hocus.

_ "Brace yourselves; we're going in a little hot!" _bellowed Sergeant Stacker.

The Chief grabbed a Spartan laser and jumped off the Pelican with the ODSs, their IFF tags identifying them as Corporal Taylor H. "Dutch" Miles, and Private Michael "Mickey" Crespo.

"Pile out! Go go go! Alright, up the beach! Take out that Wraith!" ordered Sergeant Stacker, also wearing full ODST armor.

Switching to his battle rifle, the Chief fired a burst at each of the Grunts that was surrounding the ODSs in quick succession. With each burst, there was a splash of blue blood, and the aliens dropped one after the other.

The Brute Captain Ultra backing the Grunts up put up more resistance, harassing them with his brute shot. And if that wasn't bad enough, two Shade turrets had noticed the Marines, and their Grunt Heavy operators fired frantically at the ODSs. The Chief began firing at him, but the Brute tossed down a bubble shield, the golden dome expanding outward. The Spartan charged, and smashed the bauble that produced the shield, and smashed the hilt of the battle rifle into the Brute's face. He leapt away, firing bursts, joined by the ODSs. The Brute's armor shattered into fragments, and he swayed and collapsed.

_ "Commander, this is Kilo 23," _ called Hocus as the Chief switched to, and lined up a Shade in the sight of the Spartan laser._ "Lost my

Wingman and our only Hog. Over." _

_"Roger that, Hocus. Get out of there!" _replied Keyes.

The Chief lined up the Shade, and held down the firing trigger. A red glow manifested at the muzzle of the weapon for a few seconds, and then there was a sizzling retort as a red laser beam scorched the Shade turret. The sheer force of the beam threw the Shade off its anti-grav base. The Chief lined up the second Shade, and held down the trigger again, giving it a few seconds for the red beam to lance out of the weapon and destroy the second Shade.

The ODS'Ts charged forward, and the Master Chief, switching back to the BR55HB, followed them. Grunts began to move up to engage them, and the Chief fired several bursts. Each found its target, and each target dropped like a stone, leaving only two Captains and a War Chieftain holding a fuel rod gun to oppose them. The Chief picked up and primed a plasma grenade, and threw it at one of the Captains, the grenade bonding painfully to its foot and detonating, killing him and stripping the other of his armor, leaving him fair game for Stacker and Mickey. The Chief readied the Spartan laser again, and lined up the War Chieftain, weaving between the fired projectiles with only a mild drop in his shields. He pressed the trigger, dodged for another few seconds as the red glow intensified, and the beam of energy lanced into the War Chieftain and dropped him like a stone. Next he lined up the Anti-Air Wraith, and pressed the trigger.

The Wraith never stood a chance. Somehow the pilot hadn't noticed the carnage around it, and when the beam of red energy spiked into it and hit the fuel cells at the back, the results were predictable. There was a giant explosion, and the Chief ducked away from the burning hulk.

Dutch picked up another Spartan laser from the crashed Pelican and radioed in to Keyes. "Beachhead secure, Commander. Hostile Anti-Air has been neutralized."

"Hold position. I'm on my way," replied Keyes._ "Shipmaster, begin diversionary bombardment." _

"I will beat the Prophet's shield like a drum," replied 'Vadum.
_"By the time the barrier falls, he will beg for mercy." _

A Pelican hovered above the squad and dropped off a Mongoose and Warthog for the Chief and his squad. The Chief handed the War Chieftain's fuel rod gun to Mickey, who took it with child-like enthusiasm. "Thanks sir!" he said happily. He hopped into the passenger seat of the Warthog, another Marine took the driver's seat, and Stacker took the turret. The Chief and Dutch commandeered the Mongoose, Dutch plugging the Spartan laser into a socket on the side, extending a retractable cord out.

_"Spark believes Truth can activate the rings at anytime," _whispered Keyes to the Master Chief._ "If he does, Earth... every being in the galaxy... Halo will kill them _all_." _She regained her composure.
_"Get to the first tower. Shut it down." _

As the Chief drove up the hill towards the first generator, he saw the Separatists' Phantoms battling with the other Loyalists' Phantoms on the second tower. A Banshee saw the convoy and peeled off, but

Dutch saw it coming and put it out of commission with a blast from his Spartan laser.

"Ma'am, we're on the ground," reported Sergeant Johnson over the COM._ "Third tower in sight."_

"Good," replied Keyes._ "The Arbiter and the Elites have touched down in number 2." _

"Approaching the first tower now," said the Master Chief over the COM. Two Ghosts zoomed down the hill, and Mickey and Dutch took care of them with their heavy weapons. Stacker ripped a Shade turret and the Covenant troops guarding it apart with several heavy bursts.

"Objective in sight! Watch for heavy armor!" warned Mickey as they headed up the hill, overlooking the entrance to the first tower. Two Grunt Heavys yelped in a panic and ran for their Ghosts, giving Dutch ample opportunity to destroy both Ghosts with the Spartan laser as soon as the Grunts started their vehicles up.

The Warthog took point, and Mickey fired a pair of fuel rod blasts down the hill at the Ghosts that were approaching. The projectiles sent the Ghosts spinning, and terrified yelps echoed from the cockpits. Mickey next aimed down the hill at an idle Prowler, blowing the machine in half and gutting the Brutes that tried to go after it with the scorching debris.

Putting the Mongoose into a tight turn, the Chief drifted past a Shade, and Dutch discharged the Spartan laser at just the right moment, knocking the Shade down. The Mongoose glided around a boulder, and Dutch fought to steady the laser as they approached the Wraith, still occupied in trying to bring down the Warthog. The red beam stabbed into the hatch, and the Wraith trembled and dropped to the ground. By now the second Prowler and the second Shade were ready and waiting, as was a Jackal Sniper carrying a carbine.

The Chief kept the Mongoose moving, dodging the streaks of plasma as best he could, and taking what he couldn't dodge on his armor. He drove into the pond, water sloshing up around the tires and being churned to foam.

The Warthog thundered around the corner. "I want hot barrels, people!" roared Stacker.

Mickey fired at the Shade, the fuel rod blast putting it out of commission and taking out the Sniper. Stacker kept up fire on the Prowler, slaying the gunner, leaving the main machine for Dutch to spear through with the Spartan laser. Stacker turned his attention to the terrified Covenant troops guarding the entrance to the tower, and pumped them full of Vulcan rounds.

"Chief," radioed Keyes, as her Pelican dropped off weapons._ "You've got to offline that tower." _

"Ready to go in," replied the Spartan.

"Get inside that tower. Take it down!" said Keyes encouragingly.

"Perimeter secure," declared Stacker._ "Get inside that tower! Stick together! Check your corners!"_

Dismounting the vehicles, the team headed inside.

The Chief tossed a plasma grenade through the gap, and heard a yelp. Then there was a detonation, and a pair of wet thuds. The Chief sprinted around the corner, battle rifle at the ready and firing. A Grunt twisted and collapsed on the floor, dropping his needler. The Chief seized the weapon and ducked back around the corner, reloaded and leapt out again and fired seven needles at an Ultra. The lilac armored Grunt howled and exploded.

The Chief heard several high pitched wails, and looked out just in time to see a trio of Grunts sprinting with hands held high, each clasping a plasma grenade. He fired a caddy of needles at the lead Grunt, and he dropped to the ground, the plasma grenades all exploding violently.

Then the ODS'Ts moved in, keeping a heavy rain of AR fire up on the Covenant. The Grunts went down in a hail of blue blood, and a trio of well placed plasma grenades took care of the Jackals.

The Master Chief tossed his battle rifle to Stacker, and took an assault rifle. He headed into a side area to get to the elevator that was up the top, saw a Jackal and a Grunt, and hefted a frag grenade, taking them out in a blast of shrapnel. A Brute Major rounded the corner with a brute shot, and fired three grenades. The first two missed, the last didn't, and only the Spartans quick reflexes kept the grenade from killing him. He returned fire with the assault rifle, stripped the Brute of his armor, and slew him. He scooped up a spike grenade and threw it at a Captain Major by the lift. The grenade connected squarely with the Captain's back, and tore him apart. Three Grunts and another Captain swung around and opened fire, draining the Spartan's shields again. The Chief brought one down with two bursts of AR fire, reloaded while dodging plasma pistol fire and spiker fire, and returned fire, dropping both Grunts. The ODS'Ts moved in, and Dutch fired the Spartan laser at the Captain, blasting him backwards.

"Go on, sir. Tower controls should be up top!" said Dutch.

The Chief handed Dutch his Spartan laser, and picked up the spiker. He placed his hand on the panel, and the lift began to move, the ancient Forerunner mechanisms still working perfectly.

The lift reached the top, and the Chief immediately regretted giving the Spartan laser to Dutch. He fired the spiker at the Brute Chieftain, who had been performing a sermon in front of the control panel, headed down the ramp for a weapon rack, grabbed another spiker, and unloaded them both into a Bodyguard. The Brute's armor shattered and he fell with a cry in a pool of blood.

Next the Spartan hefted all of his grenades at the Chieftain desperately, killing another Bodyguard and draining the Chieftain's shields. The Chief reloaded the spikers, and fired at the Chieftain as he charged, gravity hammer hefted. He kept up the fire, ignoring the fire from the remaining two Bodyguards, and the Chieftain's armor cracked. The Chieftain lifted the hammer and swung " and the Spartan thrust out with his palm, knocking the Brute's head back with

a sickening crack. He fired the spikers again, and the blood loss and pain sent death messages to the Brute's brain, and he collapsed.

Throwing down a deployable cover, the Spartan grabbed the Chieftain's gravity hammer, and waited for his shields to recharge. As soon as the blue bar had filled up, he sprinted out from behind cover, and with two powerful strokes, slew both Brutes with ease.

"Contacts neutralized," reported the Chief.

"_Chief, find the tower controls, and shut it down!"_ ordered Commander Keyes.

The Master Chief depressed the panel, deactivating the first tower.

Keyes voice rang out over the COM as the pillar of light shut down from the tip of the tower. _"Good work, Chief! That's one. The Arbiter should be just about to..."_ _

****Cliffhanger! Cliffhangers are â€" wait, I'm not gonna say it. I'm high on a night of Halo, sorry. But earlier I was fairly annoyed, so the first tower segment might seem like I skipped over it. I'm sorry if it does. And goddamn it, I need to spruce up the excitement of the combat.****

****Please review!****

11. The Covenant Part 2

****Halo: The Installation****

****I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I know that I haven't updated for ages. I wanted to cry when I saw that a Guest had asked if this would ever continue, and I couldn't reassure them that, yes, it absolutely will continue.****

****Trouble is, it's been that time of year, examinations and whatnot. So I've been very busy. Plus, this was an original chapter, and I had to find time to do the Covenant level and go and visit the second tower â€" the one that this chapter takes place in. ****

****Thus, the next few should be a lot faster. ****

****This one focuses largely on the Arbiter, boss that he is, and for length, I added a few bits from the perspective of Sergeant Johnson. ****

The Covenant Part 2

The Arbiter stood in the bay of the Separatist Phantom as it approached the second tower.

Explosions began to rock the Phantom, and the Sangheili began to mutter amongst themselves.

Listening to the sounds, the Arbiter theorized that fuel rod Shades and Anti-Air Wraiths were trying to fire upon them, but the Sangheili

pilots weren't having any of that, and manoeuvred out of the way, while using the heavy plasma cannons mounted under the noses of the Phantoms to systematically destroy the Shade turrets.

The firing briefly ceased as the two Phantoms locked onto the Anti-Air Wraith, and they unloaded their weaponry. Half a minute later, the sound of a colossal explosion split the air.

"_A fine kill,"_ declared the pilot of the Arbiter's Phantom. _"Their anti-aircraft defenses have been thoroughly routed."_

The Arbiter nodded. "Good. Take us down," he ordered.

At his command, the Elites readied their weapons. Usze 'Taham, the claret armoured Major who had assisted the Arbiter on Earth, clutched twin plasma rifles in his fists, along with a carbine strapped across his back. Newly promoted SpecOps Elite N'tho 'Sraom clutched a carbine himself, with a beam rifle slung across his back, though he still remained clad in his blue Minor armour.

For his part, the Arbiter still carried his energy sword, freshly charged, and a carbine. The other four Elites all carried an assortment of Covenant weaponry.

The bay doors of the Phantom cranked open. 'Sraom manned the turret closest to the tower, but the pilot wasn't having a bloodthirsty Kig-Yar Sniper put any shots into the Phantom, and kept them as shielded as possible, touching down at the tower.

"Go!" declared the Arbiter, leaping from the Phantom. He passed the burning hulk of a Wraith, and fired his carbine precisely, knocking a Grunt over backwards. The Elite briefly felt sorry for the Unggoy, but this wasn't the time for sentiment, and he quickly put radioactive rounds through another trio. The other Unggoy bravely kept firing, and a pair of Jiralhanae advanced down the tower ramp, each armed with a brute shot. The crude grenades sailed towards the Elites, but the Sangheili dodged them with ease.

'Sraom moved in, and fired three shots at the Jiralhanae, killing one and cutting the helmet of another in half. The Jiralhanae fired a grenade, and 'Sraom threw himself out of the way. He let the beam rifle cool, taking time to aim, and fired again, opening up a hole in the Jiralhanae's skull. Plasma energy crackled like a thunderstorm inside the Jiralhanae's brain.

The voice of Commander Keyes rippled smoothly across the battlenet. "_Arbiter, what's your status?"_

"We have landed, and are making our way inside now," replied the Arbiter.

"_Ma'am, we're on the ground,"_ reported Sergeant Johnson over the battlenet. _"Third tower in sight."_

"_Good,"_ replied Keyes. _"The Arbiter and the Elites have touched down in number two." _

"_Approaching the first tower now,"_ added the Spartan over the battlenet.

The Elites pressed on, and the Unggoy in the area just before the door screamed. "The Germans are coming! I mean, the Arbiter's coming!" cried one jittery individual.

"Die, Arbiter!" shrieked another Unggoy as he opened fire.

'Taham moved in, his dual plasma rifle fire slaying the Unggoy with ease. One of them used the deaths of his allies as a distraction to pull out two plasma grenades and prime them, and then he ran at the Sangheili full tilt. 'Sraom felt a hand pull him back, and he barely had time to offer a thanks to the doomed Elite Minor that had saved him as the plasma explosion consumed him and another Minor.

'Sraom roared in sorrow, but calmed down as he felt the hand of the Arbiter touch his shoulder.

"Let their lives not be in vain," declared the Arbiter. "We must reach the top. Let us hurry."

'Sraom nodded. "Yes. We cannot allow any more humans to die."

'Taham watched the Minor armoured SpecOps Elite with interest. _So, he holds an interest in humans, does he?,_ thought the Major.

"Keep moving," said the Arbiter. He led the Sangheili through the doors, and a pair of Mgalekgolo Hunters standing beneath the elevator whirled around and fired their assault cannons. The Arbiter dove out of the way of the blast, which impacted the wall beside the door and scorched the metal. He threw down a bubble shield that he'd scavenged from the Brutes outside, and waved 'Sraom over. The Mgalekgolo abandoned their pursuit of the two Sangheili, and focused on the others.

That was their first mistake. 'Sraom burst out of the bubble shield, firing his beam rifle. Two shots sank into the exposed back area of one of the Mgalekgolo, and the stricken behemoth groaned and collapsed. Its bond brother bellowed, and turned and ran for 'Sraom and the Arbiter, but this just left it open to fire from the other Sangheili, and the heavy rain of plasma slowed the Mgalekgolo down, eventually stopping it. With a mighty crash, the dead Hunter slammed into the ground.

"Hurry, Arbiter!" called 'Taham. "The Brutes will be alerted!"

"Let them come," snarled 'Sraom. "We owe them some pain."

"Focus," warned the Arbiter. "Anger will cloud our minds, and prevent us from claiming our revenge." He reloaded his carbine, and led the Sangheili through the doorway to the elevator.

A pair of Brute Majors turned and threw spike grenades at the advancing Sangheili.

"Back! Get back!" roared 'Taham, throwing a plasma grenade as he dived forward, away from the explosion. He rolled and came up, dealing an uppercut with the butt of his plasma rifle and stunning one of the Majors, knocking his helmet off. The other Jiralhanae, armour stripped by the grenade, swung his arms and knocked 'Taham into the wall.

The Brute grinned. "Die, heretic!" snarled the Jiralhanae, bringing his fist down.

'Taham caught the blow, and his arm snapped out, throwing the Jiralhanae's neck back. A less powerful being would have been killed by the blow, but all it did was knock the beast off him. The Brute came back swinging, oblivious to the fact that carbine fire had killed his ally. Another pellet buried itself in the Jiralhanae's skull, and he collapsed on top of 'Taham.

The Arbiter reloaded his carbine, and suppressed a chuckle as he heard 'Taham mutter. "Get this thing off me." Two of the Minors heaved the corpse off the Major, and 'Taham picked himself up and grabbed his plasma rifles.

'Sraom scanned the room, noting the triangular block that acted as a ramp to the next level. "It's too quiet," he muttered, clutching his carbine.

* * *

><p>"Go, go, go!" roared Sergeant Johnson, firing his assault rifle.<p>

The Grunts before them screamed as the band of Marines kept up constant AR and SMG fire, shredding the little aliens. A frag grenade from Private Dan Godwin finished them off.

"Nice one Private!" called Johnson. He targeted a Jackal that was overloading its plasma pistol, keeping it off guard long enough for Private Lopez to slay it with a battle rifle burst.

"All right, let's move!" yelled Johnson, waving the Marines onward. They boarded the elevator, and Lopez activated the ancient mechanism. The elevator moved upwards, and the Marines all reloaded.

"Get ready," warned Johnson, levelling his assault rifle. The resistance in the tower hadn't been much â€" a few low ranking Brutes, some Grunts, Drones and Jackals, but nothing special. It worried him.

Then he saw a heat-wave blur, and he opened fire in shock as plasma bolts began to swarm through the air.

* * *

><p>The Arbiter depressed the panel of the elevator, and it began to rise.<p>

The Sangheili all took battle-ready stances. 'Sraom had his beam rifle at the ready, 'Taham had scavenged two more plasma rifles from the Brutes down below, and many of the other Elites were armed with needlers.

As soon as the elevator reached the top, the Sangheili thundered down the side, and around the elevator window. Those armed with needlers targeted the Brute Captains, the flurry of needles supercombining and killing the Captains before they could get off fire from their brute shots. Three Captains had fallen before the shocked Jiralhanae could gather their wits. The two Bodyguards advanced, focusing their plasma

rifle fire on the Arbiter, who, for his part, left the killing to the other Elites, and concentrated on drawing the Bodyguards fire. As he moved towards a steel partition, he activated his active camouflage and faded from view, and just in time â€" his shields dropped and ran out.

The Jiralhanae were caught off-guard by the tactic, and their hesitation cost them dearly. 'Taham blasted one of them with both of his rifles, and the Brute crumpled under the fire. Another Bodyguard threw a spike grenade, but 'Taham was ready, and tossed down a bubble shield, deflecting the blast.

The Brute Chieftain charged, swinging his hammer. The Elites all switched to plasma rifles, with the exception of 'Sraom, and opened fire. The Chieftain's shields drained away and flickered, but his own natural resistance to damage kept him on his feet, and he swung his hammer, almost taking out a Minor with the strike. His next swing cut into the plasma rifle of one of the Minors, and knocked the young Sangheili into the wall. The Brute grinned, and raised his hammer, ignorant to the blur of motion behind him.

The Arbiter ignited his sword and thrust, stabbing the Chieftain in the back of his skull. An expression of surprise made its way onto the Chieftain's face, and he dropped the hammer as the Arbiter's sword slid out of his head with a sizzle.

The Arbiter nodded to the Elites, and walked over to the panel by the tower window. He laid his hand on it, and pushed down hard, hoping that he'd done the right thing â€" Sangheili as he was, he lacked the innate understanding of Forerunner technology that the humans were gifted with.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the tower to his right shut down.

* * *

><p>"...that's two!" continued Keyes._"It's all up to Johnson's team now." _

The Chief and Commander Keyes watched the third tower for a moment.

It remained active.

"Get back outside, Chief. Wait for transport," ordered Keyes._"Johnson, come in. Over,"_ she called.

"Brute reinforcements, ma'am!" cried Johnson as static interrupted his transmission._"We're pinned down!" _

"I'm on my way!" replied Keyes. The Chief turned and sprinted for the elevator, which had helpfully twisted the control sensor so that he didn't have to loop around the central pillar, and he placed his hand instinctively on the pad.

"Negative! Fire's too heavy!" Johnson yelled to Keyes, before barking orders at his squad._"Everyone fall back! Now!"_ he cried, before the signal cut out.

"Sergeant Major!" cried Keyes in horror. A dead silence filled the COM. _"Johnson! Can you hear me?!"_

There was no response, whether by interference, capture, or most likely death, Johnson and his team were gone.

"_Chief, you need to link up with the Arbiter and proceed directly to the third tower. Make your way back to the beach," _ordered Commander Keyes.

The elevator headed back down, and the Chief jumped off the pad and into a firefight, with another of group of Jackals and Grunts attacking the Marines holding the lower floor.

Hefting the gravity hammer, the Chief crushed all but one Grunt, who upon being confronted with such a sight primed twin plasma grenades and charged, howling unstably.

The Chief dived backwards, throwing the spent hammer at the Grunt and caving in his chest cavity. The Grunt fell, and the plasma grenades exploded.

The Chief and his squad sprinted back outside to their vehicles, and a Troop Transport Warthog pulled up outside. Stacker and Dutch took the Mongoose, while Mickey and the other Marine hoisted themselves into the Warthog. "Get in, sir," called the Marine as the Master Chief scooped up assault rifle ammo and a battle rifle from the weapons cases. "We gotta get back to the beach."

"Sergeant, lead the way," said the Master Chief, taking the Warthog's driver seat.

"Try to keep up!" remarked Stacker gruffly. He gunned the engine of the Mongoose, and the Chief and the Marines headed back to the beach, looping up and around the edge of the waterfall.

Halfway down, Hocus' voice echoed across the COM._"Sir, I've got a flock of birds that need an escort. Take a Hornet; get those Pelicans safely to the third tower."_

"Understood, Hocus," replied the Spartan.

The Chief and his accompanying soldiers met up with the Hornets parked on the beach. The Hornets resembled Pelicans, but they were much smaller, with twin rotors for propulsion.

Disembarking from the Warthog, the Chief and the two ODSTs boarded a Hornet, while the other Marines took the other Hornets. Stacker boarded the Pelican, and the air force took off.

The Hornets assisted to clear the airspace of the Second Tower, the Marines aided by the pair of cloaked Separatist Phantoms. The Chief lined up a Banshee, and fired a pair of missiles from the Hornet. The missiles tracked the alien craft and blew it to pieces, launching the corpse of the pilot and what looked like a battle rifle from the wreckage.

Fuel rod fire began to fill the skies ahead of the Chief, and he turned to see an Anti-Air Wraith on a nearby island, surrounded by a few Brutes and Grunts. He flew closer, avoiding the fuel rod blasts,

and unleashed another pair of rockets, hitting the area around the Wraith and killing the Covenant around it. Dutch finished the crippled machine off with a Spartan laser blast.

A pair of Banshees approached, firing fuel rod blasts. The Chief desperately wrenched the controls, and managed to avoid the blasts. Mickey fired a fuel rod blast, but the Banshees dodged it, and released another, which exploded into the air next to them.

"_Ah, damn!" _yelled Dutch over the COM. _"This is why I hate flying!"_ He lined up one of the Banshees and fired the Spartan laser, blowing the craft apart.

The Chief tracked the other with autocannon fire, and finished it off with a pair of rockets. The other Hornets moved in to clean up the Banshees, and caught them off-guard as the Covenant craft harassed the cloaked Separatist Phantoms, destroying each Banshee systematically until the few that remained got the message and retreated alongside a Loyalist Phantom.

The Chief and company proceeded to the Third Tower. Upon reaching its airspace, they were met with heavy Covenant resistance, both in the air and on the ground, consisting of at least a dozen Banshees, the Loyalist Phantom, a few Shade Turrets, a pair of Anti-Air Wraiths, and a handful of Brutes, Jackals and Grunts in the areas behind the Shades. A normal Wraith was emplaced on the tower itself, belching plasma mortar fire into the sky.

_"Objective in sight, Commander..." _said the Pelican pilot. He hesitated before adding, "_No sign of Johnson or his team."

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"Understood," replied Keyes sadly. _"Chief, clear an LZ, then get inside the tower." _

"We'll get it done," replied the Spartan. He patched into Dutch. "Take out the air support first, then the Anti-Air Wraith."

_"Gotcha, Chief," _replied Dutch.

"Mickey, do you have any fuel rods left?" asked the Master Chief.

"I got enough, sir," replied Mickey.

"Once the Banshees are down, if you can start on the Phantom, it'll make this job much easier," the Chief said.

"I got your back, sir," replied the ODST.

The Chief maneuvered the Hornet, keeping in line with the flock of UNSC air support. He advanced towards a Banshee carefully, the alien craft already under fire from another Hornet, and hammered it with autocannon fire. The Banshee fragmented in an explosion of plasma, and the Chief retreated from the rest of the Banshees, sparing a pair of missiles to destroy another one. Dutch got off a shot from the Spartan Laser, blowing another Banshee into fragments.

The Pelican moved in, chin-gun fire ripping a Banshee to pieces,

before fuel rod fire from the remaining Banshees forced it to retreat. This distraction gave the Chief time to let loose another pair of missiles, and another Banshee fell in fragments from the impact.

Wraith anti-air fire filled the sky, and the Chief wrestled with the controls, moving the Hornet just out of range. He targeted a Banshee and pinned it down with autocannon fire, allowing Dutch to spear through it with a blast from the Spartan laser.

The last two Banshees, horribly outnumbered, fell to the other Hornets. As soon as the last Banshee exploded, Mickey fired two fuel rods at the Phantom. Both struck their target, destroying one of the Phantom's engines. The Chief lined the other engine up, and fired a pair of missiles, shattering the second engine. The crippled vehicle shuddered, and exploded.

With the explosion in between him and the Anti-Air Wraith, the Master Chief moved the Hornet in and fired a pair of missiles at the Wraith. He finished the stricken vehicle off with autocannon fire, and there was another large explosion as the vehicle shook and settled to the ground.

The other Hornets followed the Chief's vehicle as he targeted a group of Brutes " including a War Chieftain with a fuel rod gun " at the tower outlook, above the Wraith. A volley of missiles that destroyed the plasma batteries beside them quickly took care of that problem, scattering the Brutes corpses like leaves in a wind. Dutch and Mickey both targeted the Wraith below the scene of the carnage, and fired a fuel rod and a laser blast the shattered the Wraith in another explosion. By then, the other Hornets had destroyed the last Anti-Air Wraith, and as soon as the debris settled, there was a ripple in the air above it.

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><p>With the Wraiths and Phantom taken out, the Separatist Phantoms decloaked and dropped off the Arbiter and his group of Elites and assault the infantry at the tower's entrance.<p>

The Arbiter thundered towards the tower as the Spartan's Hornet assisted the Elites, scouring the outside of remaining armor and infantry with their projectile munitions, destroying the isolated Shades before they could do more than harass the Sangheili.

The Spartan landed the Hornet and joined the Sangheili on the ground. Meanwhile, the Marines and Orbital Drop Shock Troopers from the Pelicans and Hornets followed up, and secured the perimeter around the entrance to the third tower, while the Arbiter and the other Sangheili joined the Spartan to assault the inside of the tower.

Before they pressed on to the antechamber to the tower, the Spartan waved the Elites towards him. "Take these," he said, handing them three brute shots.

'Taham was most affronted. "You expect us to soil our hands with these weapons?" he asked angrily.

The Arbiter could understand their anger, but before he could

reprimand the Major, the Spartan spoke up. "Take it or leave it. It's your call. With these we'll have the advantage."

"The Spartan is right," declared the Arbiter. He picked up one of the brute shots himself, and reloaded the weapon. Hesitantly, two other Sangheili took the grenade launchers, holstering their plasma rifles.

"Kill the heretics!" snarled a Jiralhanae voice.

The Arbiter wheeled around, and opened fire with the brute shot. The first three grenades knocked the Brute Captain Major off his feet and shattered his armor, but he had the presence of mind to throw down a bubble shield to protect himself. A few Unggoy emerged, ordered into the open by the Captain, and the Spartan quickly put them down with assault weapon fire.

The Arbiter fed another belt into the brute shot, and moved down to the antechamber. The bubble shield faded as he got close enough to slash at the unarmored Captain Major with the brute shot's tungsten alloy blade, slicing through its face. The trauma killed the Jiralhanae instantly. The Arbiter leapt backwards to escape the retaliation of the other Brutes, as the rest of the Elites kept up the pressure. The Spartan, for his part, focused on using his battle weapon to shoot the Jiralhanae in the head once their armor had shattered. A Jiralhanae would stagger, dropping his spike rifle, a sharp rattle would sound, and he would drop lifeless to the ground. The first two went down without much difficulty, but the Elites were forced to retreat after the remaining Jiralhanae got quite eager with their grenades. Reloading and allowing their weapons to cool, the Sangheili and the Spartan moved back in, with the Spartan using a human explosive to knock the Jiralhanae off guard. The Arbiter seized his chance to empty the belt of the brute shot into a Captain, killing him and badly wounding another Captain. The Spartan finished him off with a battle weapon burst. 'Taham continued to wield his plasma rifles, and put down a Major with consummate ease as the other Jiralhanae fell in an explosion of their own munitions.

The Elites and the Spartan pushed on inside the tower, coming out into a main chamber identical to that of the first two towers. A pair of Hunters emerged from under the elevator and rushed towards the Elites. "A Lekgolo pair!" roared one of the Elites. He opened fire with the brute shot the Spartan had given him, knocking one Hunter backwards. The Mgalekgolo righted itself and fired its assault cannon, and the Major dived aside.

"Split up!" ordered the Arbiter. "Flank them! 'Taham, take those with brute shots and assist the Spartan!"

"Yanme'e approach!" warned 'Sraom as he and the Arbiter backed away. He threw a plasma grenade into the middle of a swarm of Drones that had descended from the elevator, and the resulting detonation shredded over a dozen of the insectoid aliens. The Arbiter emptied his brute shot into the swarm, but the Yanme'e dodged the grenades easily, losing relatively few of their numbers. They retaliated with a storm of plasma bolts and needles, driving the Arbiter and the other Elites back in range of the Hunters. With the Spartan and 'Taham out of sight, the Mgalekgolo targeted the Arbiter, and their assault cannons knocked the brute shot out of the Sangheili's hands. The Arbiter grabbed the first weapon he could find — a discarded

plasma pistol " and fired at the Hunter's neck areas, but the twin colossus's simply raised their heavy shields and blocked the green bolts.

Just as the Yanme'e swarmed around the corner, the Spartan struck. He threw a plasma grenade at the back of one of the Mgalekgolo, and the Elites armed with brute shots fired three grenades, detonating the plasma grenade and ripping through enough of the Lekgolo worms to disrupt the Mgalekgolo combined form. In short, the Hunter collapsed, dead.

Its bond brother turned and ran at the Spartan full tilt, and to his credit, the Spartan kept firing at the Hunter's neck with his battle weapon. A few bullets made it through, but not enough. It was left to the Elites beside the Spartan to keep the Hunter at bay with their brute shots, and the Arbiter, caught with the Yanme'e, was unable to assist him.

The Spartan threw a spike grenade at the Hunter, and the explosion hid him from the view of both the Arbiter and the Hunter. The Arbiter dodged a flurry of plasma bolts from the Drones, and responded in kind, scooping up another plasma pistol and mopping up the Yanme'e. 'Sraom was taking them out methodically with his carbine, and Yanme'e corpses were beginning to carpet the floor. The other Elites kept up a rain of plasma bolts from their own plasma rifles, thinning the Drone's numbers until only two were left flying, and they turned and fled, but 'Sraom wasn't having any of that, and he put them both down with carbine fire.

There was a heavy groan and a final explosion as an explosion consumed the Hunter, and the Mgalekgolo collapsed with an almighty crash. The Spartan and 'Taham stood over the corpse, one of the brute shots in 'Taham's hands. 'Taham handed the brute shot back to the surprised Minor, and pulled out his plasma rifles. "Now that was a deed to remember!" he said.

"Right," replied the Spartan, already moving through the next door, battle rifle at the ready " and a large pack of Jiralhanae with their Unggoy and Kig-Yar subordinates wheeled around and opened fire. The Spartan retreated, throwing a fragmentation grenade at the Grunts, killing two and wounding a Jackal. He waved the Elites back as the pounding of the doors ceased.

"Can't go that way," he commented dryly.

"Leave that to us," replied 'Taham. He primed a plasma grenade, moved towards the door, and threw it through as it opened, catching a Major on his arm. There was a loud cry of shock, and the grenade detonated as 'Taham retreated.

"All of you!" ordered 'Taham. "Ready your plasma grenades!"

The Sangheili all primed plasma grenades, and 'Taham opened the door again. Unfortunately, the Jiralhanae had gotten the same idea into their heads, and they threw their own spike grenades in unison, dodging the explosion as the Kig-Yar and Unggoy were consumed. The Elites lost their shields in the explosion, and the Brutes advanced, firing their spike rifles.

The Spartan had managed to avoid the bulk of the explosion and fired

his battle weapon in quick succession, slaying another Major. 'Sraom had the same idea, and retreated as his shields began to recharge, killing a Minor with carbine fire.

By now, the Elites had all gotten into sufficient cover for their shields to recharge. The Arbiter engaged his active camouflage, and faded from view, and waved at the Spartan to open the door. The Spartan did so, slaying another Minor with battle rifle fire, and the Arbiter slipped through as the remaining Jiralhanae tried to slay the monster that was the Demon, Hidden behind a weapons crate, he primed his last plasma grenade and tossed it over. It didn't kill any of the Covenant, but that wasn't his intention, and the distraction gave the Spartan and 'Taham time to charge through the door and open fire on the Brutes. Both fell in a storm of bullets and plasma bolts.

"To the next room!" declared the Arbiter. "Make haste!"

He grabbed plasma grenades and a pair of spike rifles from the ground, while 'Taham exchanged his spent plasma rifles for fresh ones. The Spartan scooped up a pair of spike grenades " and he quickly threw one at the corner leading to the next room as an Ultra emerged, holding a spike rifle. The explosion shattered his armor and sent him back around the corner.

The Elites pressed on, firing with calculated efficiency at the Brutes. 'Sraom took down a Captain Ultra with his beam rifle, but had to leap back to get away from a Captain that was holding a mauler. The Spartan took him out with battle rifle fire, and retreated as another mauler armed Ultra pursued him, charging recklessly into the midst of the Elites. 'Taham knocked him to the ground almost casually, and the other Elite Major finished him off with a few needles to the face.

Shields at full the Arbiter threw a spike grenade through the corridor, catching a Captain Major and blasting his chestplate into pieces. The Spartan moved in and dropped the Captain Major with a battle weapon burst to the heart. The final two Brutes tossed a power drain, and the device began to drain the Elites shields, forcing them back again. The Spartan spared a spike grenade before he too backed away, but the Jiralhanae had dodged the grenade, and moved forward, firing their brute shots. The grenades forced the Elites back even further, and the Arbiter took cover around the corner, and pulled out his energy sword, activating his active camouflage. As the Jiralhanae rounded the corner he swiftly brought the sword up in an uppercut, killing the Captain instantly. The Captain Ultra, now all on his own, turned and swung his brute shot, and the Arbiter was thrown backwards, clutching his chestplate.

Then the Brute gurgled as the Spartan jumped on his back, and stabbed him in the neck with his combat knife. The Spartan wrenched the blade out, and the Brute toppled to the ground.

"Thank you," said the Arbiter.

"Don't mention it," replied the Spartan. He held out his hand, and pulled the Arbiter to his feet. "Let's shut this tower down."

The Elites made their way to the elevator, and a Yanme'e swarm reacted to their presence and buzzed into the air. The Elites had

caught them off guard though, and they quickly slew the swarm with slew of plasma projectiles and spike grenades. Even if the grenades didn't catch the Drones, the shrapnel was nearly as effective. The Spartan finished off the stragglers with battle weapon bursts.

With the Drone swarm eliminated, the Spartan discarded his rifle, and picked up a needler and several caddies.

"Darken this tower and the barrier will fall," declared the Arbiter. "Go, Spartan! We have no time to waste."

Nodding, the Spartan placed his hand on the control panel, and the Arbiter and the remaining Elites held the room while the Spartan headed up alone.

* * *

><p>The Master Chief gripped the needler as the elevator moved upwards, prepared to counter whatever had killed Sergeant Johnson and his men.<p>

He was therefore quite surprised to see a lone War Chieftain holding a plasma cannon standing by the tower controls. The War Chieftain grinned as the Spartan approached cautiously.

Seeing the War Chieftain's broad grin only cemented the knowledge in the Chief's mind that something was very wrong. He spotted a distortion in the air, and then a storm of plasma bolts began to assault him and drop his shields. The Master Chief hastily backed away behind the glass partition that was between the elevator and the main part of the room, and waited for his shields to recharge. He leapt out from behind cover, tracking a distortion and firing several needles at it. There was an explosion as the needles supercombined, and the corpse of a Brute Stalker appeared, dropping its plasma rifle. The Spartan leapt backwards to avoid an incendiary grenade, flames erupting where he'd been standing seconds before. He reloaded the needler and fired at a Stalker on the right, the Brute's corpse appearing as the needles supercombined again. The Master Chief targeted another Stalker, but the Brute swiftly dodged the flurry of needles, and plasma fire forced the Chief behind cover again, and he spied maulers loaded in a weapons rack. Discarding the needler by the crate, he seized two maulers and rushed towards the left side, ignoring the few bolts of plasma that struck his shields. He fired both maulers, and a Stalker fell dead to the ground, dropping a pair of incendiary grenades. The Spartan scooped them up and grabbed a plasma rifle, firing just above a pair of slightly revealed feet, exposing the last Stalker and removing what little protection his armor granted him. Closing the distance, he finished him off with a single shot from the mauler.

That left only the War Chieftain, and he moved towards the Master Chief slowly, firing his plasma cannon. The Chief dodged the hail of plasma and threw an incendiary grenade.

Chieftain armor was immune to being stuck by plasma and spike grenades, and made needler rounds useless. But even that couldn't stop the 2200 degree Celsius inferno that the incendiary grenade unleashed on contact. The War Chieftain screamed in pain, dropping the plasma cannon as he burned slowly to death.

Picking up a pair of maulers again, the Master Chief winced at the sight. Even the Brutes themselves didn't like using the grenades, (albeit on the basis that it made the flesh of the victim unconsumable), and Marines were loath to use them as it reminded them too much of the devastation of a glassing.

"Hit the switch, Chief, and the barrier will fall!" Keyes reminded the Spartan.

The Chief walked past the corpse of the War Chieftain, depressed the pad of the third tower, and the barrier flickered and vanished.

Outside, the _Shadow of Intent_ advanced on the Citadel. "Now, Prophet...your end has come," _snarled 'Vadum.

Then there was a flash of blue and white light above them all as a Slipspace rupture suddenly appeared. A colossal purple dome with towering structures protruding from its bottom emerged from the rupture, trailing rancid smoke.

The former Covenant city of High Charity plummeted down towards the Ark.

The shock and awe in the Shipmaster's voice was evident. "High Charity..." he whispered. "By the gods. Brace for impact!"

The gigantic city-world flew far over the Citadel and the Separatist carrier. Debris from High Charity smashed right through the _Shadow of Intent's_ hull, and the assault carrier began to list slightly.

Another fragment of debris broke apart in midair. Part of the pod crashed right through the window right above the Master Chief. It stopped as it hits the elevator window, glowing eerily.

The Master Chief raised his assault rifle and prepared to engage the contents of the pod.

**Oh my god, enough with the cliffhangers! **

**Hopefully the next chapter won't be too far away. **

See ya!

12. The Covenant Part 3

Halo: The Installation

**And we're back again! Part 3 of the Covenant level is here! Then again, seeing as I rewrote the cutscenes ages ago but not the gameplayâ€|eh-heh-heh-heh. Sorry. I know you guys have been waiting. **

**As always, feel free to provide criticism, and-or-advice, because next level isâ€|wait for itâ€|Cortana. On Heroic. Please, help me now. Yikes. **

**Right, sorry, I'm getting carried away. **

****And one last statement, does anyone know how to make the line breaks in these things for fanfiction. Not the messes of dots and lines that I do, but the grey lines. Hopefully I don't have to do the other method of uploading to fix that. Please, if you know, tell me.**

The Covenant Part 3

The Master Chief heard the horrific roar of the Flood long before he saw them. The Spartan held the MA5C at the ready as a small group of human Flood combat forms emerged from the rubble, followed by infection forms that quickly rushed to assimilate the fallen Brutes.

He opened fire, and a cluster of infection forms exploded into gas. An unarmed combat form holding an assault rifle of its own was ripped apart by the rounds, but the rest quickly wised up, and leapt towards the Spartan. The Chief drew out the maulers and fired, plucking a combat form out of the air. He swung the bladed guard at another combat form, slicing through the infection form and dropping the combat form to the ground.

By then, the Brutes had all been assimilated into the Flood, and the reanimated corpses charged. The Spartan emptied the maulers clips into the oncoming wave, blowing two to pieces, and then he dropped one mauler so that he could deliver a more powerful strike with the other. He threw an incendiary grenade at a pair of incoming Brute combat forms, and they burst into flames with roars of anger.

"Shipmaster, what's your status?" asked Commander Keyes across the COM.

'Vadum replied in a panic, "Significant damage! Weapon systems disabled!"

"Move to a safe distance, stay away from the Flood," warned Keyes.

"Why would the Parasite come here?!" asked 'Vadum angrily as he moved the Shadow of Intent away from the Citadel.

The alarmed voice of 343 Guilty Spark cut across the COM, "The Ark is out of range of all the active installations!" he explained. "Priority: We must contain this outbreak, before-"

—

"No," interrupted Keyes. "First, we stop Truth. Then we deal with the Flood."

The Master Chief reloaded his weapons, scooped up another incendiary grenade, and headed past the wreckage of the dispersion pod, blowing an Elite combat form to pieces with the mauler. He grabbed more ammunition, and placed his hand on the elevator light panel, triggering the mechanism and moving down.

As the elevator descended, he could hear the roars of the Elites and the Flood alike. Gripping the mauler, the Spartan leapt off the elevator as 'Taham blasted a Brute combat form into rancid fragments,

while the Arbiter, sword ignited, carved through a pair of Elite combat forms with ease.

"Could this situation possibly get any worse?" asked 'Sraom as he took out the last two combat forms in the tower with well placed carbine fire.

They moved up to the door " and they all retreated in revulsion as they found Flood combat and carrier forms right outside. The Master Chief threw an incendiary grenade at a carrier form, and the bulbous Flood fell in flames, the incendiary gel destroying the infection forms seething within the carrier form.

'Taham spared a moment to berate 'Sraom. "You had to open your mandibles, didn't you?" asked the assault armored Major sarcastically.

The Master Chief threw his last incendiary grenade at the thickest knot of Flood, spotting a shotgun in the hands of one of the human combat forms. Then it disappeared behind a roiling inferno that reduced the Flood forms to chunks of blackened flesh. As the smoke faded, the Spartan grabbed the weapon and stuffed shells into it, discarding the mauler.

Having dealt with the surprise attack, the Chief and the Elites found the Marines, assisted by some Elites, a landed Separatist Phantom with an Elite using the plasma cannon, and 343 Guilty Spark; all engaged in combat with the Flood.

The Master Chief opened fire, and 7.62mm rounds tore through a cluster of infection forms. A Brute combat form drew its arm back and the Chief smashed it in the center of its chest with the stock of the rifle, ripping it into chunks of meat. The rest of the Flood were put down by heavy plasma fire from the Phantom.

"Quickly, I must see the point of impact; assess the damage done to the Ark," declared Spark.

The Arbiter nodded. "To the top of these hills, Oracle, no higher," he said, boarding the Phantom. "We cannot risk your capture by the Flood."

Spark entered the Phantom, and it took off as a Pelican dropped a Gauss Warthog, a Mongoose, and a Scorpion tank for the assault on the citadel, along with a few Marines. The Chief boarded the Scorpion after trading his shotgun with a Marine for a battle rifle, the Marine in question manning the Scorpion's turret, while Mickey, armed with a rocket launcher, hopped on the back of a Mongoose with Usze 'Taham, the Elite looking quite strange hunched over the vehicle. N'tho 'Sraom having commandeered a human sniper rifle, hoisted himself onto the side of the Scorpion, joined by Dutch, who'd managed to recharge his Spartan laser, and the Marines, as well as what remained of the squad of Elites, all mounted up and prepared in unison for what could be their final battle with the Covenant.

The voice of Commander Keyes rippled across the COM. "Shipmaster's carrier is out of commission, Chief," she explained. "I need you to take down Truth. The Flood's just going to put pressure on him; accelerate his plans. Punch through the cliffs! Get inside that Citadel!" _

"Yes ma'am," replied the Spartan.

"You heard the Commander!" cheered Mickey from the Mongoose. "Let's get this wrapped up and go home!"

The Elites all roared in agreement as a giant door opened in the hills, and the Master Chief moved the Scorpion forward, with the Gauss Hog and the Mongoose taking point.

The assault team moved slowly through the snowy cliffs, encountering a few small Covenant emplacements of a deployable tower and Choppers guarded by a pack of Brutes.

The Chief lined up the War Chieftain and fired the Scorpion's main gun. The 90mm tungsten shell blasted the Brute into the cliff. On the side of the Scorpion, Dutch lined it up in the sight of the Spartan laser, and the red beam stabbed out after a few seconds, cracking the tower in half. Mickey fired his launcher, and a Chopper exploded as the pilot scrambled into the driver's seat, while 'Sraom splattered the other Chopper pilots brains on the ground with a single sniper round.

"'Sraom, grab the War Chieftain's fuel rod gun," ordered 'Taham.

The Minor armored SpecOps operative nodded, leapt off the Scorpion, and grabbed the weapon, handing it to one of the Marines sitting on the Scorpion before settling back into place.

With the outpost easily destroyed, the assault team soon found themselves on the cliffs around the Citadel.

"Citadel in sight! Brutes are mobilizing everything they've got," warned a Pelican pilot.

The assault team moved around the corner and began to clear the cliff, facing Ghosts, Shade turrets, Banshees, deployable support towers, Prowlers, and many Brutes armed with heavy weapons — brute shots mainly, and a few fuel rod guns.

The Master Chief lined up a support tower and fired the Scorpion's cannon, cracking the tower in two. Before the Brutes beside it could react, a combination of fuel rods, a 102mm rocket, and machine turret fire crossed the space where they stood and they vanished in a cloud of smoke and flame, charred corpses being flung into the air. The Chief took out a Shade turret that was just visible around the corner as well, sending the main body spinning down the cliff.

As they rounded the corner, several Ghosts and a pair of Prowlers careened around the corner, plasma cannons firing. The Master Chief kept moving forward, and focused on the Prowlers, firing the cannon and flinging one of them backwards, leaving the Marine sitting on the side to finish the vehicle off with a few fuel rods. A Ghost exploded as the Gauss 'Hog shattered it with a single blast, and then another went down from Scorpion turret fire, the dead Grunt falling out of the pilot's seat. The Master Chief fired again, punching through the turret of the Prowler and through the Brute Major operating it. A rocket and a fuel rod finished the job, and the Ghosts began to retreat, but they just opened their way up to sniper fire from 'Sraom, and the Ghosts skidded forward as their operators slumped

against the controls.

The Master Chief inched around the corner, saw the tell-tale glow of a plasma battery, and fired at it. A large explosion rang out from where the battery had been, and vehicle parts sprayed into the air, followed by the corpse of a War Chieftain.

With that dealt with, a lone Wraith near a deployable tower was the only thing standing in their path, but a tungsten round from the Scorpion soon put an end to that problem, and the Covenant tank exploded in a flash of purple plasma.

"A fine kill," commented 'Sraom.

With the last obstacle taken out they met with the two Hornet Gunships near the route down into the clearing. Warthogs and Mongooses were fighting Ghosts, Choppers and Prowlers in the valley that led to the Citadel, while Pelicans and Hornets dogfought Banshees in the skies above.

"Hornets, inbound!"_ said Sergeant Stacker over the radio.

The Master Chief had just left the Scorpion to Dutch, taken a Hornet, and begun to make his way to the Citadel, when a pair of colossal Scarabs suddenly dropped down from above him and his Scarab "warmed up," the one on the left stretched its neck up while forcing its lower back down, and the one on the right twisted its main gun back and forth like it was cracking its neck.

The Chief, for some strange reason, reflected that this wasn't strange at all, considering that Scarab were composed of Lekgolo worms encased in armour.

"I count two Scarabs! Repeat_: two_Scarabs!"_ yelled a Pelican pilot in shock. _One _of the giant walkers was bad enough to deal with, but two was just going to be ridiculous.

But every Marine and Elite present knew that they each had to do their utmost to try, and what could only be described as a battle of epic proportions commenced.

Manned by Dutch, the Scorpion tank provided long range covering fire from the cliffs while the Warthogs and 'Taham's Mongoose moved about under the Scarabs to assist the Chief in taking their "legs" down with the few rockets in Mickey's rocket launcher and the Warthog's Gauss cannons whilst simultaneously dealing with the Brutes and Grunts that were manning the ground vehicles. The harassment from the Covenant ground vehicles meant that clear shots and the opportunity to take them were few and far between. 'Taham for his part simply focused on preserving the Mongoose, and left the aiming up to the ODS. It wasn't effective by any means, but it distracted many of the other Covenant vehicles long enough for the Warthogs Gauss cannons to slowly begin whittling them down.

The Hornets engaged the Scarabs and Banshees from the air, and the Master Chief blasted a Banshee into fragments with the Hornet's autocannons. Their job was made all the more difficult by the Brute packs on board the Scarabs themselves, including a fuel rod gun wielding War Chieftain per Scarab.

Meanwhile, more Ghosts, Banshees and another Prowler continued to pour into the valley to help to defend the Scarabs.

Rather than use his missiles on the Scarab's legs, for fear that he'd hit the Marines below, the Master Chief sprayed bursts of autocannon fire at the back legs of the Scarab when he could, all the while dodging the Scarab's anti-air fire and the War Chieftain's fuel rod blasts. He seized his chance to destroy a Banshee that was pursuing a damaged Hornet, and used a pair of missiles to destroy the craft. The Hornet shattered seconds later as the other Scarab blasted it with its scarab gun, and the Master Chief barely moved his Hornet out of the way.

Below, a blast from one of the Gauss 'Hogs slammed into the leg of one of the Scarabs, but with no communication, the machine wasn't going down.

'Taham had had enough, and open a channel on the battlenet. "Humans, listen and take heed!" he ordered. "Target the Scarab's back left â€" its left â€" leg. 'Sraom, your tank will have to provide as much covering fire as possible! All of you under the other Scarab, you need at least one vehicle to keep its main gun off us!"

"Leave that to me," said the Master Chief. He moved towards the second Scarab. "All of you, get out from under that Scarab, I'll have to do this alone. I'm not losing you to a stray missile."

"_You sure, Chief?"_ asked the voice of Chips Dubbo over the COM.

"I'm sure," replied the Spartan. "Assist 'Taham â€" the one in the claret armor. Go!"

"_You heard the alien, move it people!"_ ordered Sergeant Stacker. "_Take out those Scarabs!"_

The Master Chief began to bombard the top of the Scarab as the other Warthogs moved out from under it, and two Brutes crumpled and toppled off the Scarab as it turned to face the Chief's Hornet. The Scarab fired its main gun, and the Master Chief barely dodged the focus cannon blast. He edged around it, firing at its back leg, but then a fuel rod blast sizzled past the Hornet, and the Chief targeted the Brute pack and fired the Hornet's autocannons, killing one of the War Chieftain's Bodyguards within seconds. The Spartan again maneuvered the Hornet out of range of the fuel rod blasts, and fired a pair of missiles that depleted the War Chieftain's shields and killed another Bodyguard. The War Chieftain was undeterred, and retaliated with another volley of fuel rod blasts, before pulling out a rack of fuel rods to reload the weapon.

The Master Chief seized his chance, firing a pair of missiles at the Brute. They collided heavily with his armor, detonating the fuel rods and blasting his corpse off the Scarab.

The Chief returned his attention to the Scarab's legs, and fired a pair of missiles just as the Scarab placed its leg down. The blast vaporized a large portion of the metal, and the Chief followed up with autocannon fire. The Scarab shrugged the bullets off, and fired another barrage of anti-air plasma streaks.

This time, the Chief wasn't so lucky. The blasts severely crippled the Hornet, and smoke billowed from the rotors. Desperately, the Spartan fired another pair of missiles at the Scarab's damaged leg. The light panel on the interior, cracked and battered turned red as a whine filled the air, and the Scarab hunched down.

The Chief swung the Hornet around to the back, avoiding the anti-air fire, and unleashed a pair of missiles as well as several volleys of autocannon fire. Sweat began to trickle down the Spartan's brow, but he ignored it as the protective partition covering the Scarab exploded, exposing its core to fire from the air.

This of course, was easier said than done. The Master Chief lowered the Hornet, and fired a pair of missiles — his last pair, destroying the Scarab's shields and exposing the cross of Lekgolo worms. He followed that up with the Hornet's autocannons, and just as the final bullet sank into the power junction and the Scarab began to shake and whine, the Hornet's warning sensors went crazy.

The Chief wrestled with the Hornet's controls, and he managed to ease the battered craft to the ground, leaping out and sprinting towards cover as the crippled Scarab exploded, leaving a burning hulk.

"First Scarab's down!" called Commander Keyes. _"All units, concentrate your fire on number two." _

Additional reinforcements swarmed into the area to defend the Scarabs. Several whistled right past the Chief without even noticing him, and he seized his chance as a Ghost came around the corner, firing a perfectly timed battle rifle burst at the Grunt operator, causing his Ghost to stop short. The Chief pushed the little alien's corpse aside and took the controls of the Ghost himself, starting the rapid attack vehicle up and harassing a Chopper, knocking the Brute operator's corpse out of the cockpit. Before the Spartan could take the vehicle himself, a Prowler blasted it with its plasma turret, and the Chief boosted the Ghost away and under the Scarab. With constant Covenant harassment, the Marines hadn't made much progress, and the additional reinforcements had only hampered this progress.

Of course, it was just as the Master Chief arrived at the ramp of the second Scarab that a Gauss 'Hog shot dealt a crippling blow to one of the Scarab's legs, and it too lowered to the ground, diverting power into getting up again.

Leaping up, the Chief planted his foot on the Ghost, and leapt again, landing heavily on the Scarab's bay door. The constant fire from the other vehicles had killed everyone on board the Scarab, and the Chief opened a channel.

"This is Spartan 117," he said. "I'm on board the second Scarab and heading for the power core."

"_Loud and clear, Master Chief!"_ replied Sergeant Stacker. _"All units, get away from that Scarab unless you get the call to go in!"_

The Chief proceeded up towards the Scarab's core, scooping up a few spike grenades and a plasma cannon on the way. Reaching the core, he took down the core's shielding with a sustained barrage from the

cannon, then when the Lekgolo tissue was exposed, tossed in the spike grenades and two plasma grenades for good measure. He turned and leapt off the Scarab, jumped back in the Ghost, and boosted away as first the grenades, and then the core exploded. The Scarab's alarms began to whine, and there was a sucking sound as it exploded in a blast of vaporizing metal.

"Both Scarabs down, well done," said Keyes over the COM. _"Marines! Kill the stragglers!"_ she added, as the few Covenant vehicles that were left continued to assault the group. With the Scorpion tank providing covering fire, however, there really wasn't much contest, and soon the vehicles began to explode due to high-impact tungsten shells.

As the Chief moved to assist them, a Separatist Phantom arrived at the platform leading to the entrance of the Citadel, dropping off the Arbiter, energy sword drawn, and 343 Guilty Spark.

"Spartan, come to me," called the Arbiter over the COM. _"This platform hides a path!"_

Keyes agreed. _"Spark has found a way into the Citadel. He's waiting for you on the platform, Chief. Go!"_

The Chief wheeled the Ghost around, and headed up to meet the Arbiter and 343 Guilty Spark at the top of the platform.

"The Flood scales the Citadel's far wall," declared the Arbiter. "Activate this bridge, Oracle!" he ordered. Turning to the Chief he muttered, "The Prophet will die by _my_ hands, not theirs."

"That sounds fair," replied the Master Chief.

The light bridge to the Citadel activated and a small portion of the doorway to it opened up to allow entry. Both the Chief and the Arbiter ran across the bridge towards the doorway.

Spark followed them, and if he had hands, he'd have been wringing them. _"Calamity!_If only we had more time!"_ he cried.

The Chief and the Arbiter entered the Citadel alone. The door they entered through fully closed and bolted up. The entrance was a large hallway with screens mounted along the walls.

"There goes our exit," remarked the Chief as he readied his assault rifle, walking towards the end of the hallway.

Suddenly, his vision went dark, and Cortana appeared in the Master Chief's vision as the accompanying nausea gripped him again. "It asked, and I answered," she said. Her tone turned bitter. "For a moment of safety, I loosed damnation upon the stars."

Then the Spartan and the Arbiter heard the voice of the Prophet of Truth. _"My faithful...stand firm..."_The viewscreens around the Chief lit up the darkened room, showing the Prophet of Truth making another speech. The Chief and the Arbiter hurried to find a way up as the Prophet talked, unknowingly taunting them with his words.

_"Though our enemies crowd around us, we tread the blessed path. In a

moment, I will light the rings! And all who believe...shall be saved!" _

The Master Chief and the Arbiter discovered an elevator, with a screen in front of it â€" showing Sergeant Johnson held aloft by a Brute Major behind Truth. Johnson punched the Brute in the face, to no effect.

He's alive!, thought the Chief in shock. _Of course. Truth needs a Reclaimer â€" a human â€" to activate the rings. So he picked one from the easiest bunch when we split up._

_"Chief, how close are you?" _asked Commander Keyes.

They looked up the elevator shaft.

The height was phenomenal.

"Not close enough," said the Spartan heavily.

* * *

><p>Sergeant Johnson groaned in pain as the Chieftain that the Major had passed him to throw him at the floor.<p>

He winced as he rolled over, and looked the Brute in the eyes. "That the best you got?"

Brute Chieftain Pontus gave him an amused huff, then picked him up around the neck and began to strangle him.

Johnson snarled in agony, and caught himself, "Oh, come on," he choked. "Impress me."

Truth turned his gravity throne around and saw what was happening. "Stop, you imbecile!" he bellowed. "He _wants_ you to kill him!" He turned back to the Ark's console, and spoke quietly. "I'd prefer that you did not."

Pontus slammed Johnson's head into the solid holographic console, and twisted his head around to face the Prophet.

Johnson scowled at the Prophet. "What's the matter, big shot?" he asked. "Can't start your own party?"

Truth looked at the human Sergeant. "I admit: I need your help," he said quietly. "But that secret dies with all the rest."

Neither of them noticed a Pelican behind them, rapidly approaching the main Pelican broke through the window with an almighty shattering of glass, turning the heads of Pontus, Johnson, and Truth simultaneously, and crashed onto the ledge next to them, crushing a Brute, and sending his spiker flying.

Truth was thrown away, landing near the spiker.

A Brute Captain struggled up, dazed and shaking his head.

Then there was a booming retort as Commander Keyes blasted him with her shotgun, knocking him to the ground.

"Johnson!" called Keyes, ejecting a shell from her shotgun. "Sound off!"

Johnson staggered towards her, clutching his side. "Get out of here!" he coughed.

"Not without you!" retorted Keyes.

More Brute Captains surrounded Miranda and Johnson. Miranda fired away at the Brutes with her shotgun, and their armor sparked from the shots, but the short-range weapon didn't do severe damage to them, and they remained on their feet.

"You delay the inevitable," intoned the Prophet of Truth. "One of you _will_ light the rings."

Keyes drew a magnum pistol and aimed her weapons both ways. _No_, she thought. _I won't be used again._

"You cannot hope to kill them all!" remarked Truth, almost amused.

Keyes paused and lowered her weapons. She looked at her pistol. "You're right..." she admitted. She reluctantly aimed the pistol at Johnson.

Johnson nodded. "Do it," he said, walking over to her. "Me...then you..."

Keyes hesitated, lowering her pistol slightly with sadness on her face.

"Now!" snapped Johnson.

Keyes straightened up and aimed.

Then Johnson heard five spiker shots, punctuated by Keyes' dropped her weapons and Johnson started to run to her aid.

"No!" he howled as a Brute Captain restrained Johnson, who still struggled, horrified.

Miranda Keyes fell to her knees, collapsed, and died, with five glowing spikes in her back. The Prophet of Truth slowly stepped forward, gingerly holding a spiker in hand.

"Your forefathers wisely set aside their compassion..." he remarked, looking down at Miranda and dropping the spiker, shaking a fist to emphasize his speech, "...steeled themselves for what needed to be done."

Truth walked up to Johnson, clasping his hands together. "I see now why they left you behind," he remarked.

The Brute Captain brought Johnson up to the control panel.

"You were weak...and gods must be strong," said Truth, leaning in to Johnson's face. He forced Johnson's hand down on the panel with a smug look. Johnson, overcome with grief and shock from Miranda's

death, didn't resist.

Instantly the control Terminal began to change and heighten, forming twin steps up to the Terminal in the shape of rings. Truth raised his arms in triumph as six out of seven holographic Halo Rings lit up one by one, save the ring representing the destroyed Installation 04.

At the end of the corridor, the Master Chief and the Arbiter emerged from the lift.

There were two heavy thuds as two Flood tank forms dropped down from above. The Master Chief drew his assault rifle and aimed, and the Arbiter activated his energy sword.

What happened next was not a fight, but even more shocking â€" the tank forms spoke.

The voice of the Gravemind boomed through their fronds, moving like lips. _"Do not shoot, but listen!"_ warned the Flood. _"Let me lead you safely, to _our_ foe. Only you can halt what he has set in motion." _

The Spartan and the Elite walked forward, lowered their weapons cautiously, and looked down to see several infection forms scurry between their feet towards their common enemy, the Prophet of Truth.

The Master Chief and the Arbiter looked at each other. The looks said that they obviously did not trust the Flood, but knew they had no other choice.

The Master Chief, the Arbiter, and the Flood began their assault, the two tank forms leading the assault. With dividers separating the bridge in two, each tank form took a separate passageway, and the Grunts and Jackals arrayed there opened fire with their needlers and plasma pistols. The tank forms shrugged off the damage with ease and struck with their powerful clawed arms, killing the Covenant soldiers instantly in a few sweeps.

Then fuel rod blasts slammed into one of the tank forms, and the monstrosity crumpled as the SpecOps Grunt reloaded his fuel rod gun. The other tank form took no notice, simply hitting the Brute Minors and Majors until their armor shattered, giving the infection forms time to move in.

Unlike when the Master Chief had seen Brute Honor Guards battle the Flood with ease, these less skilled Brutes were more easily overwhelmed, though they went down fighting, destroying many an infection form.

For their part, the Chief and the Arbiter supported the Flood, and though it sickened them to do so, they stripped the Brutes of their armor and left them for the Flood to assimilate. Soon a dozen new Brute combat forms surged towards the Captain Ultra at the end, but he made short work of them with his brute shot.

The Chief switched to his battle rifle, and targeted a SpecOps Grunt. He fired three bursts, and the Grunt toppled from his post. The Spartan ducked away to avoid the retaliation of the other Grunt.

The Arbiter, having grabbed a needler, closed in on the other Grunt and fired seven needles. They all found their target, despite the Grunt's best efforts, and he exploded with a wild cry.

With the two Grunts dead, the Brute Captain Ultra was the only combatant remaining, and he had gone wild in the fighting, throwing two spike grenades at the oncoming combat forms. The shrapnel shredded the Flood forms, and he swung his brute shot to cleave another human combat form in two.

The Chief fired the battle rifle, aiming for the gap in the Brute's visor. The Brute tossed down a bubble shield, and the Arbiter snarled in anger upon seeing the Brute protect himself again. The second tank form moved in, and just as quickly fell out of the shield, courtesy of a powerful blow from the Captain Ultra, who emerged from the draining shield, armor cracked from the continued assault. He swatted or shot every infection form out of his way, until finally, the Master Chief scored a hit with the BR55HB.

The Brute Captain Ultra swayed, and collapsed, disappearing under a tide of infection forms.

The Arbiter ran ahead, and grabbed the SpecOps Grunts fuel rod guns and ammunition. He held one out to the Chief, but the Spartan shook his head. "I'll stick with this," he said, holding up his battle rifle.

"At least allow me to cover you," insisted the Arbiter.

The Chief nodded. "Thanks," he replied.

Moving through the automatic doors, they reached a room with a hologram of the Prophet of Truth placed on either side. "How could I have known the Parasite would follow?!" asked Truth in fury. "Undoubtedly this is the Heretics' doing! A final, bitter curse." _

The Chief moved through the door as the Prophet snarled. "Clear evidence of treachery long hidden!" _

At the second bridge, the Covenant forces made their final resistance. A squad of carbine-equipped Jump Pack Brutes soared towards them, and the infection forms made a beeline for them. However, the Brutes were wary of the Flood forms, and boosted out of reach, using spike grenades to shred swarms of Flood.

The Arbiter squinted down the bridge, recognizing the Brute Chieftain leading the Covenant. "Pontus," he seethed. He raised his fuel rod gun, and fired, but a Jump Pack Brute got in the way of the blasts as he fled from a group of infection forms, and toppled into the abyss. Pontus had noticed the carnage, and directed his Bodyguards to harass the Arbiter with their brute shots.

The Chief tracked a Jump Pack Brute, and fired at his jump pack. Headshots had proved to be ineffective for some unknown reason even if he could score them. Another battle rifle burst shattered the Brute's armor, and he plummeted to the ground, where his skull was caved in by one of his reanimated comrades. A second Jump Pack Brute landed, and disappeared behind a fuel rod blast from the Arbiter, thrown into the edge of the bridge.

Two Grunt Heavys emerged from the door at the end of the bridge, and hoisted themselves up, then tracked large groups of Flood with their fuel rod guns.

The Chief and the Arbiter ducked behind cover, the Arbiter squeezing off one last shot before reloading the fuel rod gun.

"Any ideas, Spartan?" asked the Arbiter as a carbine round whined past the partition.

"Get the rest of those Jump Pack Brutes, then take out the Grunts," replied the Chief. He ducked out from behind cover and fired a torrent of assault rounds, slowing down one of the Jump Pack Brutes. The Arbiter snatched up a carbine and fired four quick shots, plucking the Brute out of the air.

"One left," replied the Spartan, reloading. He switched to the battle rifle and fired three bursts, knocking the Brute through the air. The Brute landed, clutching his arm, and a combat form slapped at him, knocking his carbine to the ground. The Brute responded by berserking, headbutting the combat form and breaking it in two, and then running full tilt for the Chief's cover. The Chief sprang out as the Brute swiped with his arms, only for the Arbiter to pull out his energy sword and impale the Brute cleanly. The Brute gargled, and fell off the shaped plasma blade.

Fuel rod and brute shot rounds exploded beside them as they ducked behind cover again.

"You can have the one on the left," offered the Chief.

"My thanks," replied the Arbiter. He ducked out and fired three quick shots at the Grunt Heavy. The first one missed, the second one threw his aim off, and the third punched through the Grunt's skull, dropping him to the ground.

The other Grunt yelped in surprise.

"Hold your line!" snarled Pontus. He hefted his gravity hammer and smashed a cluster of infection forms into pieces, followed by an Elite combat form. "You shall not best me, Parasite!" he roared.

The Chief seized the moment to kill the other Grunt with a single accurate battle rifle burst. Pontus growled angrily at the sight. "The pack will be rid of our thirst through your blood, Demon!" he roared as he smashed another cluster of Flood forms.

The Bodyguards advanced and fired several brute shot grenades. The Chief ducked behind cover yet again, and tossed a frag grenade over the cover. The blast barely affected the Bodyguards, but it provided sufficient distraction for the Arbiter to open up with the last clip of the fuel rod gun. One Bodyguard fell dead and the other was badly wounded. The Arbiter tossed the fuel rod gun aside, picked up a carbine, and targeted the weak points in the Brute's armor with ruthless efficiency, before firing a single round through the Brute's skull.

Pontus backed away to give the Grunt Heavy manning the plasma cannon room to harass the Chief and the Arbiter with plasma bolts. Their

shields dropped and the red warning lights flashed in their HUDs as they were forced back behind the partition.

Then the Grunt screamed as the Flood renewed their assault, a cascade of infection forms surging towards him and Pontus followed by a trio of Elite combat forms.

"Hold your line! Fire at will!" bellowed Pontus. He threw an incendiary grenade, briefly creating a barrier of flames between them and the Flood. Then he engaged the invincibility device, and ran through the flames, crushing the Flood forms with the butt of the hammer.

Shields recharged, the Chief and the Arbiter both backed away as the Chieftain laughed. "You will not pass, Arbiter!" he laughed.

The Arbiter responded with a plasma grenade, but the grenade wouldn't have stuck to the Chieftain's armor normally, and Pontus shrugged the explosion off as he smashed aside a combat form.

The Arbiter drew his energy sword, and the Chief aimed his battle rifle, firing at the Brute's head. Even if the bullets couldn't harm him, blocking his vision might just be enough to slow him down.

Just as the invincibility failed, the rifle clicked in the Chief's hands, and the Spartan threw it aside instantly, having expected this, and his arm came up holding a plasma pistol. Jumping backwards, he over-charged the pistol and fired, the green bolt of energy draining Pontus' energy shields. The Chieftain's power armor still protected him however, and he swung his hammer as the Spartan brought up his assault rifle and opened fire, bullets rattling off the armor. The blow didn't connect, but the shockwave hurled the Master Chief into the edge of the bridge, and his shields dropped again and attempted to recharge.

Then the Arbiter moved in, swinging his sword in an overhead slash that sliced through Pontus' chest armor. The Chieftain brought his hammer down, but the Arbiter both reacted with fantastic speed and activated his active camouflage, fading from view. Pontus began smashing the gravity hammer wildly, knowing with confidence that he was easily powerful enough to take the Elite out even without his power armor, and his next swing displaced the Arbiter much like it had the Chief, though the Elite had landed on his feet, reappearing with an angry roar. He charged forward again, and dealt a swift uppercut before Pontus could attack again, knocking the Chieftain's helmet off.

Pontus brought down his hammer with a bark-like laugh even as bullets began to slam into him as the Chief and the Flood assaulted him. He displaced the Flood with a backwards swing and smashed the gravity hammer into the Arbiter.

Or at least, he would have had the Elite not grabbed the handle of the hammer, and altered its course. Ignoring the plasma fire from the Grunt Heavy, the Arbiter brought his energy sword up in a powerful uppercut, scything through Pontus' chest and face.

The disfigured Chieftain gasped in horror and slumped to the ground with an almighty crash.

The Arbiter's shields broke, and plasma bolts knocked him to the ground, hammering his spine. He roared in pain as the Grunt Heavy went crazy, panicking as the Flood rushed towards him and he fell in a tide of infection forms.

Victorious, the Flood proceeded to the third bridge.

The Arbiter was left for dead, as his armor's healing system kicked in. He would require additional healing later, but he had survived â€" barely.

The Master Chief approached him, and heaved the massive Elite to his feet. "Nice work," commented the Spartan. "Sorry I wasn't of more help."

"Come, we must hurry," replied the Arbiter. "Let us go!"

At the second room, Truth's holograms broadcasted a final message._"So far are we along the path, that I must strain to hear the clumsy patter of their pursuit,"_ he intoned._"Know this my brothers, they may foul the way with their charred and broken bones, but they will not stop the Journey."_

The resistance on the third bridge had already been routed by the Flood. A light bridge was all that remained to reach the Prophet of Truth.

The Master Chief depressed the holographic panel, and he and the Arbiter crossed the light bridge, and came across Johnson, who was resting the dead Miranda Keyes on his lap by her head next to the Pelican.

The Chief looked at an infected, but dormant Brute combat form, thinking that it was a miracle that Johnson had kept the Flood from consuming her body. The pair stared into Miranda's empty eyes, until Johnson closed them gently. "Stop the rings," he said. "Save the rest."

Shoulders slumped, the Chief continued to stare at Miranda, disheartened.

* * *

><p>The Arbiter approached the crawling form of Truth, his energy sword turned off but at the ready. He grabbed Truth by his robes and pointed his currently harmless sword in his face.<p>

"Can you see, Arbiter?" asked the Prophet. "The moment of salvation is at hand."

The Arbiter grabbed Truth by the throat."It will not last!" he promised.

Truth shook his head. "Your kind... never believed in the promise of the sacred rings."

Then Truth drew his head back, and Flood biomass erupted on his cheek and the back of his head, near his ears._"Lies for the weak. Beacons for the deluded,"_ he said, Flood spores pouring from his mouth, and a deeper multitude of voices speaking. The Spartan had walked up by

now, and held his assault weapon on Truth's head just in case things turned nasty.

The Arbiter drew his energy sword back and activated it, ready to kill his former leader. He cursed the Flood form that had infected the Prophet, and that was stealing his vengeance. "I will have my revenge," he warned the Gravemind. "On a Prophet, not a plague!"

Truth had regained control of his body. "My feet tread the path," he snarled. "I shall become a god!"

"You will be food - nothing more," snarled the Gravemind through Truth as a tentacle forced its way out of the pustule on his cheek, and another pustule erupted on his forehead as the Flood infection progressed.

The Spartan approached the Ark's Control Panel, ready to deactivate it.

"No!" yelled Truth, seeing the Spartan's movements.

The Spartan depressed the panel, knowing that it was the right course of action, deactivating the Ark. The six holographic Halo rings dimmed. No-one wanted to know just how close they'd been to firing.

Neither one of the pair saw a Flood body begin to stir.

The Arbiter had turned Truth to see his work — his life undone by the Spartan. The infection was progressing rapidly now, and with a final effort, the Prophet bellowed, "I...am...Truth! The voice of the Covenant!"

The Arbiter turned Truth away from him and grabbed his neck viciously. Truth's crown fell off as he pitifully gasped for air, trying to grab the Elite's hands. "And so, you must be silenced," snarled the Arbiter, and he stabbed his sword through Truth's back. The shaped plasma boiled clean through him with a squeal; the two points of the energy sword poked through his writhed and screamed in pain. Flood spores shot out of his mouth and the infection let out a pitiful squeal.

The last of the High Prophets was dead.

The Arbiter let Truth's corpse fall to the floor, and let out a roar of triumph, before deactivating his sword.

The Spartan looked at him and nodded, acknowledging him for ending the life of the Prophet who declared war on humanity; they turned to see the Sergeant carrying Miranda's body into the Pelican. There was a moment of silence as the Arbiter, and the Spartan as well, realized their victory had not been without loss.

Suddenly, the ground began to tremble, and massive tentacles rose up all around them from the bowels of the Citadel. The Spartan raised his assault weapon and the Arbiter reactivated his sword. They both stared up at the tentacles, which were now reaching high above them. The voice of the Gravemind laughed manically.

The Sergeant leapt into the Pelican cockpit and started to take off.

The Spartan climbed onto the Control Panel of the Ark and jumped onto the Pelican's landing gear. He held out his hand, much to the Elite's surprise, and the Arbiter leapt, grabbing the offered hand.

Just before the Pelican could make its way out of the hole in the Control Room window that Miranda had made, both the Spartan and the Arbiter were knocked off by the tentacles, sending the Pelican spiraling out of control.

On the ring, the tentacles swerved around them and multiple Flood forms appeared, ready to tear into their betrayed allies.

The Gravemind was in full swing. _"Now the gate has been unlatched, headstones pushed aside...corpses shift and offer room, a fate you must abide!"_ he intoned confidently.

The Arbiter held his sword at the ready, igniting it once more, and the Spartan readied his assault weapon. They came back to back.

The Arbiter remarked, almost exasperated, to the Spartan. "We trade one villain for another."

The tentacles retreated and Jiralhanae combat forms came up from the control panel.

* * *

><p>The Chief opened fire with his assault rifle, putting the combat form down as Sergeant Johnson apologized profusely. "I can barely keep hold of her, Chief! No way I could pick you up! Head back to the lift... find a way down!"

The Arbiter sliced through the other combat form, and the two of them charged around the control Terminal as the Flood began to approach the light bridge. The Spartan threw a plasma grenade, blowing a pair of combat forms to pieces, and shredded the infection forms with AR fire. He thundered across the bridge after the Arbiter, and grabbed a shotgun that one of the combat forms had been holding, reloading the weapon and blowing a human combat form off its feet. He switched back to the assault rifle and powered his way through another cluster of infection forms.

Quickly they entered the second room again, and the Flood burst through the door. Briefly, the Chief and the Arbiter stopped to fight them hand-to-hand, the Arbiter was unstoppable, carving through the Flood with his energy sword, and the Chief's shotgun boomed again and again, blowing two, three, four combat forms off their feet and into pieces of flesh. He switched back to the assault rifle and shredded the last infection forms with several quick bursts, and then they charged through the door, the Chief reloading both of his weapons.

Fortunately, the Sentinels had arrived and were fighting the Flood, their sentinel beams efficiently eradicating the parasite. More Elite combat forms charged down the bridge, half their numbers falling to the Sentinels, and the rest to the blade of the Arbiter and the Spartan's shotgun. The Chief dodged aside, blew one last combat form

in half and scooped up its shotgun ammo. He entered the first room, and backed away in shock as a pair of carrier forms waddled towards him, detonating and hurling infection forms into the air. An entire magazine of assault fire and then some was sufficient to destroy all of the infection forms.

The Spartan's vision chose that moment to go mad as Cortana appeared on his visor. "I'm a thief...but I keep what I steal," she remarked cryptically.

The next bridge was well guarded by the Sentinels, and the Chief and the Arbiter had collected sufficient grenades from the Flood (why they carried them but never used them was a mystery to the Spartan), and they proceeded to fling four of five at the thickest cluster, blowing the Flood to shreds. There were still five combat forms â€" including an Elite combat form clutching an energy sword.

The Arbiter dealt with it swiftly, attaching his now-spent sword to his armor and igniting the combat form's fresh weapon. He sliced through two others with ease, and the Chief backed him up, taking down those that he'd missed with powerful shotgun blasts.

That left the way to the lift clear, with a dozen stray infection forms crawling around. The Chief hosed them all with assault fire, leaving the room clear. Unfortunately, the lift wasn't working, so they jumped down a shaft at the back of the room.

The Chief landed at the bottom of the shaft, landing in a room not unlike the entrances to the three shield towers. He looked beside him as the Arbiter came down, and then stood up.

A flickering, spooky image of Cortana appeared in the hallway, running. She started to turn the corner and disappeared after a split second.

The Chief casually walked around the corner as though amused by Cortana's antics, but the Arbiter was confused.

"What do you see?" asked the Elite.

With the Arbiter trailing far behind, the Chief looked around the corner. He saw a control panel, and Cortana appeared a second time, again for only a second, walking loftily and spookily towards it.

She stopped at the panel and disappeared.

The Master Chief headed for the panel and activated it with that innate knowledge that came whenever the Forerunners were concerned.

A viewscreen slid open, and the Chief and the Arbiter stepped out onto a balcony. They looked at the Core of the Ark, pink tinted clouds shrouding the area.

Then a massive structure rose up out of thick fog.

It was white-ish grey, a massive ring that had to be close to 10,000 kilometers in diameter. Clouds seemed to pour from it, like water running from an emerging submersible. The structure rose past the

window, obscuring it completely, and _still_ going.

It was a Halo Ring, incomplete, rising from inside the Ark's Core. Cortana's plan was becoming clear.

The Arbiter turned and looked at the Chief. "A replacement," he reasoned. "For the ring you destroyed."

The Master Chief spoke sharply to a blue glow behind him. "When did you know?"

343 Guilty Spark hovered up from behind the Chief and the Arbiter and glided up to them. _"Just now - but...I had my hopes,"_ he admitted. _"What will you do?"_ asked the little Monitor nervously.

"Light it," said the Spartan immediately.

Spark paused in complete surprise before replying, _"...Then we are agreed! A tactical pulse will completely eradicate the local infestation! I will personally oversee the final preparations."_

He hovered enthusiastically around the Chief and the Arbiter, who exchanged a look, and then the Monitor flew off towards his new Halo, now talking to himself.

"Though it will take time to fabricate an activation index, I will see to the letter that..." and then he moved out of hearing range.

The Arbiter noticed Spark's statement too â€" the Halo didn't have an activation index. "How will you light it?" he asked.

Then first the Chief, and then the Arbiter both turned to look at High Charity.

A thiefâ€|but she kept what she stoleâ€|, thought the Spartan.

****Jeez. ****

****Too much epicness! We have the final Chieftain battle, the killing of Truth, the double Scarab fight, the end of the Covenant. Far out. ****

****But now I must move on, and face the gauntlet that is Cortana. It was actually quite fun the first time I did it on Normal with my brother, as we had the opportunity to strategize quite deeply, but when I did it on Normal for the first time alone, it was quite a bit harder â€" and scarier. I'm someone that can get easily scared in an environment that you can lose control in very quickly, I admit, although it probably won't be as bad this time round, even if it's Heroic.****

****For those who didn't know, the Elites that are named in this and the previous chapter, N'tho 'Sraom and Usze 'Taham, are the other Elites that are playable in the campaign. The Brute Chieftain, Pontus, had his name inspired by the Greek name for the sea (I mistook it initially as 'below' Tartarus, and as he was pretty much the highest ranking Chieftain other than Tartarus, I went with that.)****

****See youâ€|sometimeâ€|not sure how long doing and remembering all of Cortana will take.****

13. Cortana

****Halo: The Installation****

****Oh jeezâ€|so nail wrenching. That's all I have to say.****

Cortana

A Covenant Banshee glided through the sky above the Ark. The battle with the Covenant had been ending after the twin Scarabs defending the Citadel had been destroyed, and assassination of the Prophet of Truth. With no-one to give them orders, the Brutes had begun fighting amongst themselves, making them easy pickings for the vengeful Elites.

But this Banshee didn't belong to a Covenant straggler, but was being piloted by the Master Chief. And he wasn't retreating to the _Forward Unto _Dawn, but advancing towards the fallen, once proud Covenant holy city of High Charity, now a hive of the Flood, partially submerged in one of the Ark's oceans.

The Chief spotted an opening into the hive and pulled the Banshee into a turn, aiming for, and settling into the opening perfectly.

Like the Flood-infested cruiser that had crash-landed on Earth, the interior of High Charity was covered in organic matter, though it had a pinkish color due to the light that shone through the city. Bridges had been grown where there were none previously, and buds â€" no doubt containing new infection forms â€" lined the walls. And somehow, despite the fact that the ship had crash landed upside down, the Chief was right side up â€" obviously the artificial gravity generators were still working.

As the Master Chief landed the Banshee and crawled out of the alien craft, assault rifle ready to fire, the voice of Sergeant Johnson crackled across the COM. _"Chief, I'll round up our survivors, fall back to the Dawn."_

The Chief dropped down onto a wider platform from a hole above it, leaving the Banshee behind.

"Arbiter will do the same with the Elites," added Johnson.

Not that the Elite had been happy about it, even though he'd wanted to assist the Spartan, it had been agreed by both parties that the Arbiter â€" the main link between the humans and the Elites â€" should organize the retreat, especially as he was still recovering from the fight with Pontus. The Chief snapped out of his melancholy, and shook off some organic material that was stuck to his armored boot.

"Cortana's in there somewhere..." muttered Johnson as the Chief looked around a wide area, with a few somehow uninfected Brute and

Elite corpses from the civil war that had erupted in High Charity when he'd first arrived in the city.

For a moment, the Spartan felt a stab of genuine pity. The Covenant had killed billions over the span of twenty-five years, and yet surely a large amount of their own had been subjected to a fate worse than death in a matter of days. And, as Johnson had said, Cortana trapped was in the city-world somewhere, and the Chief knew what she'd been trying to tell him.

The Master Chief began searching, further in the hive. As soon as he'd raised his assault rifle the Flood attacked, a swarm of infection forms dancing out of the shadows, heading straight for the Spartan.

The Chief opened fire, and the infection forms began to pop in clouds of spores, the chain reactions shattering two or three with a single bullet, but they kept swarming out of the darkness, and an instant later, the Spartan realized why â€" a stray bullet had pierced one of the buds attached to the wall and it had disgorged another tide of infection forms. Rather than waste time reloading, he backed past the corpse of a Brute and grabbed the dead Covenant soldier's spiker, and pelted the oncoming Flood with white-hot spikes.

The last infection form popped, and the Spartan reloaded his weapons. He stowed the assault rifle behind his back, and grabbed an Elite's plasma rifle after reloading the spiker and scooping up both a plasma and incendiary grenade. He debated scaling the bridge for a flamethrower, and decided against it.

Weapons at the ready, he moved through a darker tunnel, deeper into the hive. Blackened and scorched fragments of the Covenant metal emerged from the Flood flesh in a larger room beyond a few hanging tentacles that the Chief had approached cautiously, though they had been passive and not done anything to impede his movement. The same went for a strange organic "door", a circle divided into segments that twisted open repulsively when the Master Chief approached it.

What did impede his progress, however, was a multitude of voices that echoed from the walls, overwhelming his ears with a barrage of sound.

"Child of my enemy, why have you come? I offer no forgiveness; a father's sins passed to his son."

The Spartan shook his head, and quickly made sure that there weren't any Flood forms rushing him. Fortunately, the Gravemind didn't seem to have set them loose upon the Spartan, and he slowly continued on. He found another of the segmented doors in the ground, and it opened to admit him, yet the Flood hadn't noticed him, and he threw a frag grenade down, blowing a combat form apart.

The Spartan leapt down, and his vision was assaulted by an image of Cortana, letting out a strange mix of cries of agony and psychotic laughter.

But the Master Chief didn't get time to relax. Even as his vision returned to normal, the Flood were upon him, and he tore a Brute combat form in two with a blow from the spiker, forced to drop his

plasma rifle, then he grabbed another spiker and unloaded them both into a group of infection forms. He put down a Brute form as it rose up, freely mutated, and only just pinned down an Elite combat form as it advanced, cutting it to pieces and releasing a wisp of foul gas.

Cortana's voice emerged from the speaker of a crashed Pelican. "I tried to stay hidden, but there was no escape! He cornered me, wrapped me tight... and brought me close."

He did what?, asked the Chief internally and angrily. A carrier form began to waddle around the corner, and the Spartan dropped one of the spikers and threw an incendiary grenade, destroying the Flood form and the cluster of infection forms inside it with a surge of flame. Then he delivered another powerful strike and carved through a human combat form, causing it to drop its SMG. Seizing the human weapon the Chief fired a rain of caseless rounds at another infected human, shattering the corpse into fetid chunks. He reloaded, targeted the other carrier form, and fired another volley, popping the Flood form and unleashing a dozen infection forms, which the Spartan shredded with the SMG fire.

The momentary lull in the combat gave the Chief time to collect two spikers, both of which he filled up fully, and stored several backup clips.

He moved up towards the hill of metal plates and flesh, which rather helpfully formed 'steps', and a group of stalker forms turned and headed right for the Chief. The Spartan put one down with a barrage of spikes, reloaded, and jumped backwards, away from a horde of combat forms. One of the reanimated Elites followed him down, and he riddled it with spikes that tore it apart, before firing at a ranged form that had just mutated from a stalker form. The Flood form mutated back into a stalker form, and the Master Chief felt like groaning in frustration â€" the Flood pure forms seemed almost impervious to damage when they were mutating. An Elite combat form armed with a shotgun leapt down and fired, the buckshot dropping the Chief's shields. The Chief tore it apart with the spiker rounds in retaliation, narrowly dodged a brute shot grenade, and targeted a pair of stalker forms as they leapt down to harass him. One of them was unable to evade the Chief, and went down in a hail of spikes, but the other quickly leapt back up the hill â€" and a waypoint indicator appeared of the Master Chief's HUD.

I could use one of those jump packs that the Brutes had right now, thought the Chief as he watched his enemies get out of reach again. The stalker forms retreated, but the Chief had no doubt that they'd be back, and picked up the shotgun that the Elite form had dropped, leaving the depleted spikers behind.

The Master Chief leapt cautiously up the 'steps', shotgun leveled. A trio of human combat forms saw him and charged, but the Chief was already throwing a plasma grenade, the projectile missing and hitting the wall, binding to the organic matter and detonating as plasma fire and magnum shots whistled past the Spartan.

A stalker form waddled in as the Chief threw another plasma grenade, this time bonding to the leg of one of the human forms and blowing it and another combat form apart as the Chief blasted the third human form with the shotgun. He turned to the right and popped a few

infection forms with his assault rifle, leapt off the edge as a stalker form caught itself before it followed, drove it away with a few bursts, and moved back up the hill before backing away at the sight of six stalker forms on the other side. Five pursued him, and they all began to swell and grow, followed by another four stalker forms.

One of the lunged as the Chief threw yet another wayward grenade, and the blue bar dropped a tad. Before he could blow it apart with the shotgun, it leapt away from him. He harassed the group of pure forms with AR fire before a tank form took offense and ran at him. He moved in and shot it twice with the shotgun, backing away before it could retaliate, and now also dodging needles from two ranged forms. He switched back to the assault rifle, and the 7.62mm rounds put the tank form down. He dodged around a pillar, let his shields recharge, and fired on a pair of carrier forms waddling towards him, before shredding half of the resulting infection form with a storm of bullets, leaping away from the ones that got too close " he still had the scar on his neck from his last close encounter with an infection form. Two stalker forms leapt down as well, but retreated after they saw the Chief deal with the infection forms with practiced skill. He pursued them up the hill, and the tank forms advanced again. One mutated into a ranged form, and crumpled under the AR fire.

The Chief reloaded, dumped his empty shotgun (having been unsuccessfully trying to take out the pure forms as they mutated), and picked up a magnum. He opened fire, and the bullets struck the forms in the face, causing them to flinch back in shock. When he retreated, and they mutated to ranged forms, he grabbed a spiker and opened up, killing one before it could mutate back, and slapping at the tank form with the spiker, drawing from the gashes the thick mucus and blood secretion common to the Flood forms. He picked up another and dodged as the tank form slapped at him, though the glancing blow dropped his shields. He backed away, shredded another swarm of infection forms, grabbed a plasma rifle on one of the steps that he'd only just noticed, and picked up a mauler, using the combination to take out a tank form that was spewing infection forms on the ground. After that followed precious seconds of cleaning up the infection forms.

More tank forms appeared around the corner, driving the Spartan back. He killed one of them with the mauler when it got too close, blew another cluster of pods to pieces, and discarded the weapon, blasted another tank form with the plasma rifle until the Flood form collapsed (and subsequently yanking his hand off the scorching weapon as its cooling cycle began), and threw down a bubble shield as a pair of ranged forms harassed him. His shields regenerated, and he dived out and put the ranged form down.

By then, both the Master Chief and the Flood had lost their patience, and the stalker forms charged, and each of the five were swiftly put down with powerful punches.

The Spartan grimly shook the spongy gore off his gloves, emptied the plasma rifle to deal with another swarm of infection forms, and picked up an assault rifle from one of the human combat forms that he'd put down minutes earlier " though it felt like it had been hours. He smacked another stalker form down with the butt of the rifle and finally moved on further, grabbing a carbine from a weapon

rack to replace his depleted plasma rifle.

Then the Master Chief pressed on, past another bud filled corridor, and through another of the disgusting circular doors which opened as he neared it.

And the walls â€" the Gravemind â€" spoke, the cacophony overwhelming the Chief's hearing. The Flood sounded quite amused. _"Of course, you came for _her_... We exist together now. Two corpses, in one grave..." _

The Chief ignored the Gravemind's voices, and moved on, but the Flood knew how to strike psychologically, and then he heard Cortana's distant voice moan, "A collection of lies; that's all I am! _Stolen_ thoughts and memories!"

The walls spoke again, the Chief's vision overcome by the revulsion at being contacted by the Gravemind as it mused, _"And yet, perhaps a part of her...remains?"_ It began to laugh, and the maniacal laughter faded into Cortana's own deranged chuckles.

The Chief paused before the next segmented door, and felt sick to his stomach. He was starting to wonder if there would be anything of Cortana left to save, but quickly he mentally kicked himself. _No. No, she's here. I'll save her, _ he thought.

With that bolstering him on, he walked through the door, drawing out the carbine. The corpses of Elite Minors and one Major, as well as a few Brutes littered the ground, being fed on by infection forms. The Chief scooped up plasma and spike grenades, shot through a few of the infection forms, battered an Elite form with several rounds, and leapt backwards between two pillars just as a Brute combat form hit the spot where he'd just been standing.

Now that he had a better angle, the Spartan shot down one of the Brute combat forms, and broke the two combat forms that pursued him in two with swift punches. He shot down four more combat forms with precise carbine shots, and moved up a passage, discarding his carbine for an energy sword that lay on the ground. The bodies of a Chieftain and another pair of Elites were strewn around the weapon, as well as the Chieftain's gravity hammer, which the Spartan dismissed. The energy sword was quicker and more precise. He leapt down a hole in the flesh-covered floor, and advanced onwards.

A larger room was up ahead, and the Master Chief immediately targeted an Elite combat form holding its own energy sword â€" taking note of a dead Elite with yet another sword by the Chief's own feet â€" shredding the Elite form with assault fire. Another Elite form advanced, and the Chief ignited the energy sword and cleaved through it with ease. He retreated under a needle onslaught from several ranged forms, grabbing the Elite form's plasma rifle, and desperately threw a plasma grenade, blowing one to pieces.

Taking out the sword again, the Chief stealthily moved up towards a transparent partition and sliced three stalker forms in two. He backpedaled, threw down a deployable cover, and waited for his shields to recharge before he targeted an Elite combat form with a plasma rifle. The ex-Elite dropped to the floor in a heap.

The Spartan suddenly remembered Major 'Taham, and how he had

effectively dealt with the ranged forms on Earth. He put down another Brute form, threw a spike grenade, and killed another ranged form in the ensuing explosion of hot shrapnel. He sprinted behind a transparent partition to escape the needles, drew the energy sword, and bisected a stalker form before grabbing a needler.

Cortana's voice began to speak casually and kindly, as though nothing was wrong. "May I speak with you, please?... What's your name? It's very nice to meet you!... You like games? So do I."

I'm a little busy right now, Cortana, thought the Master Chief as he blew a pair of ranged forms apart with a caddy of needles. A tank form began to spew out infection forms and the Chief retreated, grabbing a plasma rifle and blasting the pods apart. He broke a Brute form in two, let the weapon cool, and matched an Elite form, crushing the infection form in and dropping the combat form to the floor.

The rest of the infection forms were finished off by friendly fire from the trigger-happy ranged forms as the Chief hid behind a large holo-table.

The Spartan let the shields of the Mark VI recharge and raced out to grab another plasma rifle. Now he could press on, and a storm of plasma bolts put down both ranged forms. A final stalker form shifted into a tank form, and the Chief ignited the sword and cleaved through it with ease.

Unfortunately, he'd hit a Flood growth pod, and he was forced to waste plasma rifle charges on destroying the resulting swarm. He moved down to a lower level, grabbed a mauler, and blew the rest of the swarm to hell.

More Covenant bodies littered the lower levels, and the Chief grabbed a pair of incendiary grenades. He saw a strange Terminal in the corner, and moved towards it, almost drawn by the Forerunner technology, and he activated it.

Cortana's voice cried out in protest. "It was the coin's fault! I wanted to make you strong, keep you safe..." Her voice dropped in tone. "I'm sorry, I can't..."

Another possibility tormented the Master Chief. It was quite possible that Cortana was becoming rampant, the condition by which "smart" AI's died after a seven year life span. But Cortana was only three or four years old, so it couldn't be normal rampancy.

No telling what the Gravemind did to her, thought the Chief grimly.

A tank form charged into the room, and the Chief blasted it with his plasma rifle, and then finished it off with a pair of mauler shots.

He moved back up, and beyond from where he'd entered, into a narrow tunnel swarming with infection forms which he put down relatively easily. The Master Chief turned a corner, blew a carrier form to pieces, and hosed the infection forms with the plasma rifle to clean up. He shredded another carrier form and its infectious cargo, and blew a stalker form in half as needles began to emerge from it with

the mauler.

Then he emerged into a larger area leading to a canyon-like passage lined with Flood bridges. A tank form batted a weapons crate out of the way and charged, but the Chief was ready for it, and a storm of plasma bolts and a pair of mauler shots were sufficient to keep it out of action. He dropped the mauler and picked up another plasma rifle, blasted a ranged form into oblivion and backed away behind a mound of flesh.

Again, Cortana's voice echoed in his ears, upset and frightened, "I'm just my mother's shadow... don't look at me, don't listen! I'm not who I used to be..."

The Chief was driven back into a smaller passage, waiting for his shields to recharge. _Hold on,_ he thought grimly as a waypoint marker appeared at the end of the canyon.

Then, methodically, the Spartan began to work his way up the tunnel. He blasted the nearest ranged forms with plasma fire, moved on to find cover, let his shields charge and his rifles cool, and then moved onto the next. He ignored the stalker forms as he couldn't track them, but kept his ears open in case they mutated. With this method he killed three ranged forms, beat back a swarm of infection forms, and retreated to grab a carbine when the charges of the plasma rifles ran dry.

As he moved up to where he'd advanced, a stalker form tried to blindside him, onto for it to meet its end at the blade of a fresh energy sword. He spied a brute shot that he'd missed, and picked up the ugly grenade launcher, firing a belt at a group of oncoming combat forms. The Flood roared as the grenades or the brute shot's blade tore them to shreds.

The Master Chief threw down a bubble field and drew out the energy sword again, bisecting two more combat forms with swift uppercuts. Discarding the empty brute shot he picked up two spikers, and moved further up the passage. He killed a ranged form with a barrage of the spikes, and the Flood form shrieked as it fell from its perch. The final ranged form fell as well, before it could morph to a stalker form and escape.

With that done, the Chief entered another passage, and then he actually moaned in pain and shock as the Gravemind's angry voices closed in, his vision turning green, _"Time has taught me _patience!_"_ snarled the Gravemind._ "But basking in new freedom, I will know _all that I possess!_" _

The Chief pressed on, the Gravemind's threats worrying him. Not for himself â€" but for Cortana. She couldn't take much more of this.

He emerged into a large room after passing through another segmented door. He put down a stalker form with a barrage of spikes, before dumping the Brute weapons on the ground and seizing a carbine from a crate. An Elite combat form charged, and the Chief switched to the energy sword and cleaved it in two. He brought out the carbine again and put down three combat forms on a spiral walkway with precise shots that targeted the infection forms controlling them.

A Brute combat form tried to flank him through the tunnels, and the

Chief cut it down. He moved into the tunnels, activated his flashlight, felt an impact as a stalker form attacked, and cut it in two, then another fell before his blade.

The Spartan weaved around the tunnel for a bit, and then lunged at a tank form. The blow missed, and the tank form struck back, but the Master Chief dodged the full force of the blow and cut it down properly. He cut through a ranged form before it could act, and with a powerful uppercut, split a stalker form down the middle. Then he caught an Elite combat form off-guard, and met another successfully. The pieces of flesh from both bodies landed with a disgusting thump.

Quickly, the Chief sliced at another stalker form, but the speedy Flood form dodged again and again. The Chief spotted a pair of incendiary grenades, rushed out and grabbed them, turned and met a Brute form decisively. He spared the moment to send a few carbine rounds down the ranged forms way, and returned to the sword to bisect a pair of combat forms. Then he finished off the ranged form, taking it off the wall as it curled up.

Letting his shields recharge, with the last ranged form out of reach, the Spartan exchanged his sword for a fresh one, and his carbine for another pair of plasma rifles. Then he moved up the spiral walkways, blew an Elite combat form apart with a storm of plasma bolts, and jumped over a hole in the floor of one of the ascending tunnels. Needles tracked him the whole way, but even the Flood needles couldn't fire through their own flesh, and the combination of Flood flesh and Covenant metal kept the Chief safe as he ascended.

The Master Chief made a jump over a gap onto a flesh bridge, and moved through a short tunnel, having noticed a Flood door on a platform above the room, a waypoint marker appearing above it. He turned left, jumped another gap, and smiled grimly as he caught a stalker form napping. He switched to the sword and cleaved it in two.

Moving through the door, the Spartan staggered as Cortana invaded his vision. Her voice was panicked, and slightly distorted.

"I have walked the edge of the abyss. I have seen your future, and I have learned!" she cried in panic.

The image of Cortana suddenly turned a tinge of green, she clutched her head and writhed in pain as the Gravemind interrupted.

"_Submit_" it bellowed furiously. "_End her torment and my own_"

The green tinge in the Spartan's vision faded, and he shook the organic matter of his hands from where he'd clenched the fleshy walls.

Just after the Chief had passed through an area littered with Brute bones and skulls, a larger door opened. The Chief emerged into a massive room, a cross shaped structure in the middle, and a ring of paths around the edge. Though the purple hues of the Covenant were more prevalent, Flood flesh formed bridges to the middle path and sealed off sections of path.

The Chief saw no reason to go through the stalker form-infested middle, and moved around the edge, catching a stalker form off-guard before it could mutate. He blasted a ranged form until the plasma rifles overheated, and the Flood form crumpled, falling into a chasm that had opened up in the path, which put a hole in the Chief's plan to sneak around the edge.

Switching to the energy sword, the Spartan sliced through a pair of combat forms, and leapt into the middle, cleaving a Brute combat form in two before it could unleash its brute shot at him. A group of stalker forms milled around in a panic, and the Chief brought them down with precise uppercuts before they could mutate. He switched back to the plasma rifles and blasted down a ranged form by a door on the far side.

Then there was a blink, and a blue arrow appeared behind the door on his HUD.

The Chief was quite confused at seeing the objective marker, and moved along the Flood bridge cautiously, pulled out the energy sword to cut a tank form in two, and grabbed a fresh pair of plasma rifles from an overturned weapons crate. He blasted the final ranged form with the rifles, watched it crumple, and followed the highlighted door out of the reactor room, running down a passage to an intermediate room with another passage leading deeper into the ship.

And then, Cortana spoke, appearing in his vision as she writhed and spoke in a panicked, distorted voice.

"There will be no more sadness, no more anger, no more envy!" she cried in panic.

The Gravemind interrupted, more enraged than ever. _"You __will__ show me what she hides...or I shall feast upon your __bones__! Upon your bones!" _it bellowed.

The Chief ignored the pounding in his ears, and sprinted as fast as he could â€"which was extremely fast â€" to reach the end of the hallway â€" and Cortana contacted him again, her image green and elongated.

Cortana spoke in a calm, distorted, monotone voice as though she had been brainwashed. "This is UNSC AI Serial Number CTN 0452-9. I am a monument to all your sins."

_A monument to all my â€" our â€" sins, _ thought the Chief. _What the Gravemind said when it captured us the first time. Cortanaâ€" what happened?_

The Master Chief rushed to the end of the hallway and the door opened, revealing Cortana lying prone in a stasis field in a center podium. From what he remembered from his time here previously, the room resembled the Sanctum of the Hierarchs â€" the Prophets of Mercy, Regret, and Truth.

Raising the plasma rifles, the Spartan bashed the shield until it finally failed.

The Master Chief leaned closer towards the panel Cortana was on. The AI's holographic avatar lay pitifully on the podium, pain and shame on her face. The animated code that usually flowed across her skin was absent, and she seemed to have darkened in her blue tones.

"It's going to be lonely in here," she said. "But at least he won't take you too. Don't forget me."

The Master Chief looked at the AI in shock at her condition before responding. "That'd be kind of hard," he said, struggling to get the words out. He steeled himself and continued. "And he's not taking either of us, okay?" he said.

He couldn't stand to see Cortana like this, when she was always composed, always with the answers. Silently, the Spartan vowed that the Gravemind would pay for what it had done to Cortana.

Weakly, Cortana looked up at the Chief's visor in shock. Clearly, the Gravemind had been messing with her mind, and she'd obviously been hallucinating, judging from the words that she'd been contacting him with.

She looked to be still afraid that she was hallucinating.

"You found me," gasped Cortana weakly. She curled up in shame of her submission to the Gravemind, in shame that the Chief had to see her like this. "But so much of me is wrong... out of place. You might be too late..."

The Master Chief knelt right next to Cortana and resting his head on his forearm, he leant against the podium. "You know me," he said. "When I make a promise..."

Cortana slowly raised her head again and looked up at the Chief. She started to glow. "You... keep it," she whispered, before replying in an amused tone. "I do know how to pick 'em."

"Lucky me," remarked the Chief. "You'll be back to normal soon," he said. "Good as new, in fact," he lied, before getting down to business. "Do you still have it?" he asked hesitantly.

Cortana slowly stood up, and she began to glow more brightly, the lines of code and equations once again beginning to fall over her surface. She opened her palm and a hologram of a T-shaped object, black with green lines, appeared hovering over it. "The Activation Index from the first Halo ring," she explained. "A little souvenir I hung onto...just in case." She looked around at the small room, with the one way out undoubtedly guarded by the Flood. "Got an escape plan?" she asked as coyly as she could manage.

The Master Chief rose up. "Thought I'd try shooting my way out - mix things up a little," he replied.

The Chief took Cortana's old data chip out of his helmet and held it in front of her. Cortana touched its core and uploaded herself into the chip, and the Chief inserted Cortana back, at long last, into his armor, wincing as they interfaced. Back she was, but there was still something wrong with Cortana.

Sounding jokingly exasperated, Cortana added. "Just keep your head

down... There's two of us in here now, remember," she reminded him.

The Chief picked his plasma rifle back up, but Cortana felt that he was taking too long.

"Chief, get me out of this place," whispered Cortana. "I... I don't want to stay."

"Don't worry," replied the Chief. "The feeling's mutual."

But as the Chief moved into the first hallway, the walls shook, and the voices of the Gravemind assaulted the Master Chief and Cortana. It was more potent than ever before, as if every Flood form on High Charity let out a bestial roar and the words it spoke made the Chief's blood run cold.

_"Now, at last, I see! Her secret is _revealed!_"_

Well, that's not good, thought the Spartan.

The Master Chief made it back into the reactor room, and immediately went to work, blasting a Brute combat form to chunks. A tank form loped towards the Chief, and he pulled out the energy sword and slashed through its face, knocking it backwards. He switched back to the plasma rifles and put a ranged form down with a storm of plasma bolts.

"Let's get you out of here," said the Chief to Cortana.

"Wait, we need to buy some time," protested Cortana weakly. "This reactor... start a chain reaction. _Destroy_ High Charity."

Realizing the Chief's plan, the Flood began to swarm the reactor room. The Spartan slashed through a stalker form, and threw an incendiary grenade at the Flood another the reactor controls, barbecuing the combat forms in an inferno. He put down another ranged form as he waited for the flames to die down, and moved into the center, caving in the head of one optimistic stalker form. The Spartan laid his hand on a panel, and Cortana worked her magic, exposing the reactor pylons.

Three armored cylinders extended from the ceiling.

Glad that he'd kept his grenades, the Spartan threw one grenade at each pylon to open up their casings, two plasma grenades and one incendiary grenade. He finished each pylon off with grenades from a brute shot that lay on the ground.

As soon as the last pylon exploded, there was a muffled bang and an angry roar from the Gravemind. Explosions began to break out across the room, and the Flood forms resolutely held their positions between the Spartan and the door.

"You hurt it, Chief," observed Cortana. "But not for long. We need to get to Halo - destroy the Flood once and for all."

"At the moment, I'll settle for taking out this lot," remarked the Master Chief. His plasma rifles cut down a pair of Flood forms, but

the weapons were running low on charge, so he grabbed the brute shot and fired, blowing a Brute combat form apart. The fragments spilled in all directions, as there was a large explosion and a bang. The Chief was quite surprised, he hadn't fired _that _many grenades, or had the combat form had some of its own?

Cortana explained as the Chief dodged spiker and plasma fire. "An explosion just made us an exit! I'll mark it on your HUD, Chief, go!"

"You always have been a backseat driver," remarked the Spartan as he emptied the brute shot at the remaining Flood by the door leading out of the reactor. The explosion that had unsealed the door had killed a few of them, and the Spartan grabbed two spikers, finished off a ranged form, and leapt over the bridge, diving through just before another explosion wracked the crippled room.

Sprinting now, the Spartan reached the large spiral room, and without missing a beat, leapt off the top and hit the ground running, ducking into the next passage.

"Speaking of your driving, thanks for telling me where you were," he commented.

Cortana sounded incensed. "Is that sarcasm, Chief?" she asked angrily.

"No," replied the Spartan in surprise. "That wasn't you?"

"It was all I could do to keep the Gravemind from learning about the Index," explained Cortana. "I wasn't up to much else."

"That's odd," remarked the Chief thoughtfully.

As the Spartan reached the canyon-like passage, he leapt through the bridges and tunnels, dodging the Flood forms as they swiped, gargled, and roared at him. He made it down to the bottom just as his shields were depleted, but by then he was back in the relative safety of the corridors leading to the terminal room.

"Analyzing the route ahead..." said Cortana. "I have it mostly figured out. Just keep moving, I'll update your HUD as you go."

The Master Chief moved into the large cross-like room as explosions erupted around it. The deployable cover that the Chief had left still shone brightly, with several Brute and Elite combat forms clustered around the door behind it " and soon Cortana realized why. The combat forms charged as Cortana analyzed the structures beyond.

"Corridors ahead have all collapsed. I'll find another way, Chief; be careful," she said.

"I'm doing my best," replied the Chief tensely, slicing through a group of combat forms. His shields dropped from repeated blows, and he turned and fled away from the combat forms. Fortune was against him, however, and an Elite combat form lunged for him with an energy sword clutched in its grasp. It was all the Chief could do block the combat form's blade with his own energy sword, and he was briefly reminded of his duel with an Elite Major on a mission to rescue

Doctor Halsey.

Of course, no matter the host, a combat form was no swordsman, and the Chief blocked another thrust, and then kicked the combat forms legs out from under it, before slicing the reanimated Elite in two.

The blue bar filled up, and the Chief charged, grabbing a carbine and swinging the weapon, crushing the infection form in the mouth of a Brute combat form and dropping the corpse to the floor. He backpedalled swiftly, and put the radioactive rounds through the infection forms of both a Brute and an Elite combat form.

A Flood tank form smashed its way through the wall, and the Chief bisected it with the energy sword, though the Spartan was far more interested in the maintenance tunnel that had been opened up by the tank form.

"There, Chief, into the maintenance tunnel," said Cortana.

The Chief was already in, taking a passage that led back into the area at the top of the 'steps', and he leapt headlong down it, sprinting for one of those disgusting doors, which still opened to admit him, despite the circumstances.

Suddenly; a yellow blip appeared on his motion tracker as he began to head out into the open again.

Cortana had noticed too. "I've got a friendly contact!" she cried. "But who would be crazy enough to come in here?"

The Master Chief could remember the first time that he'd fought an Elite. The Sangheili were as strong as Spartans naturally, and were impressive looking creatures, unlike any of the other Covenant races that the Chief had encountered.

He heard a familiar roar as he rounded the corner of another disgusting organic biomass bridge, and saw a massive group of Flood surging towards the Arbiter, who fought back furiously with the flamethrower the Chief had left behind at the beginning. The Flood howled as they burned under the stream of fire from the weapon, while the Arbiter grimly avoided the flaming corpses.

The Chief suppressed a grimace at the destruction, and decided that he was extremely glad that the Arbiter was on their side. He took out three combat forms with carbine shots, popping the infection forms nestled in their chest cavities, and grabbed a battle rifle from one of the human forms, took out a carrier form and another human combat form, and snagged the human form's SMG before the infection forms that had burst from the bulbous form, emptying its magazine into the swarm, popping all of them.

The Arbiter spotted the Chief as the Spartan scaled the maze of flesh bridges, and nodded to him. "Spartan!" called the Elite. "There is a working Pelican by the wreck of my Banshee, not long from here!" He torched a Brute combat form, and the mutation dropped to the ground in a puddle of flame. "I shall cover you!"

Cortana sounded quite amused at the exchange. "Wait, you two made nice? What else have you been up to while I was gone...?" she

asked.

The Chief fired his SMG, ripping a combat form to shreds and slicing into a carrier. The bloated Flood form exploded and the dozens of infection forms that had seethed within rushed the Chief, only to meet their end in a torrent of 7.62mm rounds from a discarded assault rifle that was now in the hands of the Master Chief. "I'll tell you the story later â€" it's a thrilling tale," he commented dryly.

A tank form rose up before the Chief, and the Arbiter torched it with the flamethrower.

The Chief dropped another Brute combat form with heavy fire, and then stood back to back with the Arbiter as they made their way to exterior of the ship. "You know, there's a saying among our Marines about flamethrowers," he said.

"What is that?" asked the Arbiter curiously.

The Chief kept his voice even. "It takes a real lunatic to use a flamethrower."

The Arbiter was quite surprised, decided that this was human humor, and chuckled, lacking the capacity to pull a psychotic grin.

Destroying a last swarm of infection forms, the Master Chief and the Arbiter reached the Pelican, from the In Amber Clad, and boarded it. The Chief raced to the cockpit, uploaded Cortana into the Pelican's holotank and started up the engines.

Outside the Pelican, one of the Gravemind's smaller tentacles advanced towards the dropship, but the heat from the thrust of the warming engines forced it to retreat.

The Pelican shuddered, but took off, smoke pouring lightly from the left engine. The Gravemind's tentacle returned and began to wrap itself around the dropship, but the Chief wrenched the controls to the left, escaping the tentacle's grip and throwing it aside.

The Master Chief hoped that there weren't going to be any more surprises like that tentacle, but he wasn't focusing on that right now, he kept his eyes on the hole of sky ahead of them.

Behind him, the Arbiter, though keeping quiet, clenched the seat behind the Chief as they approached the gap.

The dropship narrowly made it through the gap in the outer shell of High Charity, blackened and cracked by explosions that continued to blanket the surface of the fallen space station.

Their Pelican barely escaped from the massive explosion that had been caused by the reactor going critical as High Charity was finally destroyed. The last pride of the Covenant was consumed in gouts of flame and plasma, and the Flood began to burn, the howls of the Gravemind unheard by the Pelican's occupants.

The Pelican soared through the air, slowly making its way to the new Halo ring.

**Let's put in perspective how hard this was. Normally, if I don't remember something in great detail from a level, I do that level again. This? Heeeeeelll no. I just pulled up the film, and quite literally transferred a lot of what I did, and where I struggled to the paper. **

**As for the objective telling us where Cortana is, it's the only way that I can think of that the Master Chief would have found Cortana, and she, as she pointed out, was certainly not up to the task herself. So I'll leave that hanging for a wee bit. **

**This also includes some altered dialogue from a short story in Halo: Evolutions, which is a collection of incredibly awesome short stories set in the Halo universe and well worth anyone's read. It throws the Gravemind in a very interesting light (want to know why he speaks in poetry? It's in there), and does a very good job of outlining what Cortana went through. **

**So now we have but one level left and boy will it be big. As always, criticism is appreciated, and probably deserved; if you have any questions feel free to ask, and please, everyone, please, review, because if I need to improve, (and you all know that I do), then you guys are the best people to tell me this. **

**Thanks. **

14. Halo

Halo: The Installation.

Here we are, ladies and gents. The final level. Badass-ness will ensue. You all know it. Well, hopefully. This is one that I've been awfully nervous about, this is the final stage, the final level, and I've just realized that I'm annoying you with this repetition. Sorry. I've used the film again for this chapter, and I did my best to operate efficiently, but I wasn't the best, so this took quite a few playthroughs.

To the Guest who reviewed as Duude, what I meant was that I hadn't seen it in a FANFICTION novelization, I know about Halo: The Flood (I do mention it in my author notes), and I've read it, which influences my Halo writing style somewhat in terms of the combat descriptions. As for the Forerunner books, I'm planning to buy Silentium at some point, because it's the only one that really catches my interest and doesn't let go. Thanks for the recommendation though.

And to the Guests, thanks, I hope you've been enjoying this. I'm not sure if I deserve that kind of praise though. Reach, eh? I'll have to check and see what the other novelizations on the web are like (I've read at least one finished one before, but I don't remember it exactly.) Wow, I've been asked to try my hand at Reach **_and **_**4 now, I'm really honored. Not sure I'm good enough, but we'll see, I guess. Fortunately those happen to be the **_**other**_** two Halo games that I have access to. I did copy the transcript for Dawn and I started to mess around with it in my spare time. Most fun I've had in ages (don't get me wrong, I love writing for this as well.) I did the same for Winter Contingencyâ€¦meh, not quite as fun as with Dawn, but like I said, I've seen a few already, doing my own is kinda weird. And I was doing Dawn first, so that

might have factored in.**

If anyone's interested, I'd certainly be open to the idea of a joint project of covering one or both of Reach and 4. Let's finish this first though, shall we?

Anyway, let's do this.

Halo

The Master Chief's battered Pelican soared through the sky of the Ark, towards Halo, emerging from the installation's atmosphere past billowing pillars of cloud. The space above the Ark was empty, as only two surviving ships had remained behind, the _Forward Unto Dawn_, and the _Shadow of Intent_, the latter of which was set to head to the Portal and back to the Earth.

_ "We are aboard, Humans... and Elites,"_ declared 'Rtas Vadum over the battlenet from the bridge of the assault carrier._ "Will you not come with us, brother?" _he asked the Arbiter.

The Arbiter shook his head from his position behind the Master Chief in the Pelican cockpit. "No," he said firmly. "This is our fight. And I will see it finished," he promised.

With that, the Pelican flew towards Halo. The incompleteness of the installation was evident, large chunks were missing and the surface lacked most of the Earth-like land mass of the other Halo rings.

Cortana was talking with Sergeant Johnson over a blued videoscreen. "Johnson? Do you have the frigate?" Cortana asked.

_ "Yes, ma'am,"_ replied Johnson politely._ "I'll land her as close to the control room as I can." _

"Safe is better than close, Sergeant Major," Cortana advised him.

Johnson nodded. _ "Roger that. And ma'am, it's good to have you back,"_ he added.

The Master Chief glanced at Cortana, who looked quite pleased at the praise. The Spartan put the thought out of his head as he flew over a rocky mountain, bare, grey and lifeless. The Pelican had arrived at Halo.

The escape from High Charity had damaged the Pelican's rear port engine too much for a normal landing, so the Master Chief was forced to make a crash landing in a snowy canyon near the Control Room, flaring the landing jets as best he could to slow their descent.

After assorted weapons were scattered in the snow, the Master Chief and the Arbiter clambered out; unhurt from the crash, as the snow had done a beautiful job of cushioning their landing.

From behind the cliffs approached the _Forward Unto Dawn_ as Sergeant Johnson guided the ship to a secure landing zone.

Cortana viewed the scene from behind the Master Chief's visor. "Halo," she remarked. "It's so new... unfinished. I'm not exactly sure what will happen when we fire it..." she admitted as the Arbiter tossed the Chief an MA5C assault rifle.

"We'll head for the Portal," replied the Spartan, as he shouldered a rocket launcher. "And we'll all go home."

The Chief and the Arbiter mounted up to the control room, making sure that they had stocked up enough supplies from the crashed Pelican. Both the Chief and the Arbiter had a pair of fragmentation grenades, the Arbiter had some plasma grenades, and the Arbiter was armed with dual plasma rifles and his energy sword.

Snow drifted lazily through the air as they walked over a bridge of snow covered rock, but neither felt the cold, as their armor protected them from the elements, though it couldn't prevent the chill of anxiety that ran through them.

"Head through the cliffs," said Cortana helpfully. The Chief and the Arbiter headed through the icy caves, passing by a cave with what appeared to be a skull lying in it, and over several snow-covered bridges and cliff paths. As the Chief reached a series of grey horizontal pillars, he felt something that seemed to tug him to the right, towards a passageway that opened up in the cliffs.

The Master Chief stood and looked at it for a moment, and then he headed for the passage instead of the control room.

"Where are you going?" asked Cortana as the Spartan jumped into the passage.

"Spartan, what do you see?" asked the Arbiter, jumping likewise and following him down the passage.

The Chief stepped off the edge of the door, looked right, and backed away from the large drop, looked left, and saw an angular pillar.

"Wait, what is that?" asked Cortana as the pillar opened to reveal a yellow dome. The Arbiter emerged from the passage, shaking snow off his armor, and examined the machine intently.

"I'm not sure," replied the Chief honestly. He reached out and laid his hand on the yellow dome, feeling that this was how the machine worked. His intimate knowledge of operating the Forerunner artifacts had directed him flawlessly again, and slowly, yellow text began to scroll across the screen.

_[Father]__, _

_I hope this message finds you well and helps you understand my decision. Today I leave the only world I have ever called home, not for glory or __[the anomalous desire to end another's life[?]]__ as you have __[indicted]__; but to __[travel the path of demons[?]]__ to spare the hands of __[another Father's son]__. _

"_Had we acted sooner; had we acted more decisivelyâ€¦|" _

_Living in the past is a luxury none of us can afford. We must learn

from it, but we cannot live there. It is impossible to plan for the
__[now]__ - the present is ever fleeting. __[The future]__ is where
we must live - __[the future]__ is what we must plan for. _

_I do not look to trade my life in order to preserve our past, but to
secure the future - and if not ours, then the future of some
__[culture]__ yet to come. _

_Isn't sacrifice in the interest of others what you spoke of as being
so noble? Should I have allowed another to bloody his hands while I
remained safe behind a __[shield of privilege]__? _

_You raised me better than that. _

_[Filial Devotion]__
>_[(_);_% [?]]_

_archv. 28355.67204.85720:[retr]
>archv. 28355.67204.85720:[proc]
archv.
28355.67204.85720:[proc]_

_archv. 28355.67204.85720:[catERR]
>CONN.

--

I'LL TELL YOU WHO I AM

--

-.
>.713 ghost.713non-auth/activity ongoing
>.713 refl

_I AM MENDICANT BIAS.
>THIS IS WHAT I HAVE DONE.

_ .713 POS/NAV 83034.47743.67281...7 _

_/ FRAGMENT 7/7 [RECORDED VERBATIM AND INTERPRETED POST-CATAclysm]
_

_D: Proud? When I have failed you utterly, how can I feel anything
but sorrow? _

_Bias has come undone. He crossed the line this morning - brought the
abomination with him - and destroyed your waiting rescue party. It's
over. We're activating the __[destructive arrayed matrix]__, our
shameful last resort. _ _I can picture you in your garden, surveying
all you have created - surveying all you have preserved. And I curse
the circumstance that keeps my finger on the trigger. D: Of all the
fates to befall us, this is the cruelest of all. My inaction and
hesitation and foolishness kept me here, on the wrong side of the
Line. And __[300 years [?]]__ of our society's failure and
miscalculation makes me your executioner. _ _It's too much to bear.
_

_/ ERROR â€" NO CARRIER OR RECEIPT AVAILABLE {DEAD END TRANSMISSION}

> INFORMATION DESTROYED IN TRANSIT _ _D: Mendicant Bias is trying to

prevent us from firing the Array. He speeds back to the Ark, but he won't succeed. Offensive Bias will stop him, and I will burn this stinking menace in your name. _

_And then? _

_I will begin our Great Journey without you, carrying this bitter record. Those who come after will know what we bought with this
__[false transcendence]__ - what you bought, and the price you paid.

_ _/ FRAGMENT ENDS

> ALL RECORDS CEASE _ _archv. 28355.67204.85720:[retr]

>archv. 28355.67204.85720:[proc]
archv. 28355.67204.85720:[proc]

>archv. 28355.67204.85720:[catERR]
CONN._

_.
>NO. THERE IS MORE.
BUT YOU ARE NOT WORTHY._

_.
>NOT YET.

_.
>.713 ghost.713non-auth/...
>.713 refl

_You don't know the contortions I had to go through to follow you here, Reclaimer. I know what you're here for. What position do I take? Will I follow one betrayal with another? _ _You're going to say I'm making a habit of turning on my masters. _

_But the one that destroyed me long ago, in the upper atmosphere of a world far distant from here, was an implement far cruder than I. My weakness was my capacity - unintentional though it was! - to choose the Flood. A mistake my makers would not soon forgive. _

_But I want something far different from you, Reclaimer.

_

_Atonement. _ _And so here at the end of my life, I do once again betray a former master. The path ahead is fraught with peril. But I will do all I can to keep it stable " keep you safe. I'm not so foolish to think this will absolve me of my sins. One life hardly balances billions. _

_But I would have my masters know that I have changed. _

_And you shall be my example. _

The Master Chief pulled his hand away from the screen as if it had been burned. The Arbiter stood beside him, and they both looked at the words in shock and horror.

The Arbiter was the first to speak. "The Forerunners" he said slowly. "They created this"Oracle"we had it powering the Dreadnought on High Charityand it sided with the Parasite, rather than destroying it." He didn't go on further, the notion of allying with the Flood had always sickened him, but the Elite knew all too well how persuasive the Gravemind could be.

"They made something to crush it," commented the Chief, moving their

analysis further along. "They were buying time so that they could fire Halo."

"I suppose this Oracle regrets its deeds," the Arbiter concluded. "I remember an incident where it almost launched when we first encountered your people."

A thought struck the Master Chief. "Mendicant Bias must have been putting those waypoints on my HUD, when I was in High Charity," he said. "He probably sent the Sentinels to help us out earlier as well."

"How many of these have you found?" asked Cortana as she contemplated the findings. "That construct seems familiar â€" it might have been what was opposing me when we were trying to stop Truth and Mercy on High Charity." When the Spartan didn't reply, she projected an image of herself onto his visor. "Come on, Chief, let's get back on track. The Control Room is outside!"

Nodding in agreement, the Chief and the Arbiter backtracked, passing under a passage of the thick metal struts and emerging at the foot of the pyramid-like Control Room structure. Ledges on either side of the cliffs provided alternate routes to the top of the structure, although the main route up was a series of ramps that alternated around the pyramid.

Suddenly, there were several loud crashes, and pods of blackened metal and organic matter began to drop in, burying themselves in the snow with massive thuds, and exploding to reveal shambling figures.

And as the pods continued to fall, the angry voice of the Gravemind boomed through the mouths of the Flood combat forms, most prominently though the infected corpse of Brute Chieftain Pontus, clutching his gravity hammer and charging for the Master Chief. _"DID YOU THINK ME... _DEFEATED?_"_ it bellowed.

"Flood dispersal pods!" explained Cortana. "Control Room's at the top of that tower, Chief, go!"

"In a second," replied the Spartan. He targeted the infected Pontus with the M41 and fired, the projectile hitting the combat form dead center and blowing it apart. Fragments flew in all directions as the Chief aimed at a pair of Elite combat forms and fired again, and the combat forms disappeared in a ball of flame. The Spartan wrenched the cover off the launcher, and reached for the rockets that were strapped to his back.

A human form wielding an SMG charged forward across the snow, only for the Arbiter to blast it into fragments with his plasma rifles. The Master Chief had reloaded by then, and blew a pair of combat forms trying to flank them to pieces as they moved to the right, trying to get to the ledges that led to the Control Room's ramp system. The Arbiter, meanwhile, kept the Flood from flanking them, dropping two more human combat forms in pieces with heavy plasma rifle fire, while Flood stalker forms crawled up the side of the tower, trying to reach the top before the Chief and the Arbiter could.

The Master Chief fired another rocket, blowing apart a Brute combat

form before he could fire his brute shot. He spotted another set of rockets lying in a ledge, and rushed up to grab them as another round of dispersal pods smashed into the ground. The Spartan yanked up the cover of the magazine, slid the rockets into place, pulled the cover down, and then blasted a pair of Elite combat forms apart, and the Arbiter moved in to exchange his depleted plasma rifles for their own before the pieces of fetid flesh had finished hitting the snow. Another cluster of combat forms ran down from the ramps, and yet another flanked the Spartan and the Elite. The forms flanking them soon staggered and fell, and both the Arbiter and the Chief coughed as the stench of cooked flesh wafted towards them. The Chief fired his last rocket at the oncoming cluster, and the combat forms ceased to exist.

The Spartan left the empty rocket launcher on the ledge, backtracked through the snow, found and grabbed the two SMG's that the human combat forms had been holding. He brought them up, moved around to where the Arbiter crouched behind a snow-covered boulder as the Sentinels continued to manage the Flood with their Sentinel beams.

The Spartan had been privy to the stench of cooked Flood before in the Library of the first Halo, and he suspected that the main reason that the Arbiter wasn't participating in the combat was to avoid the horrible smell. He crouched down beside the Elite.

"The Flood are assaulting from the upper levels," remarked the Arbiter. Indeed, the combat forms were leaping from the upper levels, and a few lucky individuals came into contact with Sentinels, more often than not destroying the flying Forerunner machines.

"Stay under the overhang," advised the Master Chief. "Let's go."

He sprinted out from behind the boulder, and the Flood whirled around and began firing. Spikes, plasma bolts, varying sizes of bullets and Flood needles either passed by him or came into contact with his shields, but he managed to get to cover under the overhang formed by the next level, and he targeted the nearest combat form and put it down with a rain of caseless rounds from his SMG's, causing it to drop its flamethrower.

He dropped behind cover as the Flood were assaulted by the Arbiter, who unleashed a storm of plasma bolts at a Brute combat form, and the fragile combat form was pushed backwards and over the edge, taking its brute shot with it.

The Chief sprang out from his cover, shields fully recharged, and took down another two human combat forms with SMG fire. The submachine guns clicked, and the Spartan holstered them and drew out his assault rifle, put down an Elite form with a few bursts of AR fire, making sure to keep under the overhang.

Behind him, the Arbiter had picked up the flamethrower, and the Elite shouldered his way past the Spartan, the shielding provided by his bulk gave the Spartan time to reload his weapons. Sliding the last magazine into his SMG with a click, the Spartan aimed past the Arbiter and caught a ranged form off guard, caseless rounds burying themselves in the Flood form and knocking it to the ground.

A stalker form jumped down, but the Arbiter torched in mid-mutation,

and it went wild, running towards a trio of oncoming Brute combat forms and setting them all on fire. The inhuman roar of the Flood echoed from the resulting inferno.

Then a tank form ambled around the corner, and the Arbiter barely had time to release a jet of flames from the flamethrower before the tank form displaced both it, the Chief and the Arbiter with a single powerful swing. Their shields dropped, the Spartan and the Elite both got the same idea, and threw their fragmentation grenades at the flaming tank form before it could spew out any infection forms. There were four explosions and a roar of pain as the tank form was torn apart.

They waited for their shields to recharge, and then as they moved around the corner _another_ tank form began running towards them on all fours. Before it reached them, the Master Chief spotted a red glow on the cliffs behind the tank form, and he tackled the Arbiter aside as a red beam of energy lanced through the tank form and passed through the space where they had been standing.

Sergeant Johnson stood on the cliff with a Spartan laser, shooting down the Flood forms. _"I got you covered, Chief,"_ he radioed in. _"Meet you at the top of that tower."_

The Master Chief and the Arbiter continued upward, and with Johnson providing covering fire, the Flood was much less of a threat, the pure forms were easy pickings for the Sergeant's Spartan laser, allowing the Chief and the Arbiter to concentrate on the combat forms. But each combat form took a storm of bullets or plasma bolts to be put down, and the Chief was out SMG rounds and running low on assault rounds, while the Arbiter was down to a single, mainly depleted plasma rifle.

Both were therefore quite happy when a pair of combat forms sprinted towards them, an Elite and a human form, holding a carbine and a shotgun respectively. Both staggered under fire, and then were consumed in an explosion from a plasma grenade that the Arbiter had thrown. The duo scooped up the dropped weapons, and the Arbiter instantly put down three combat forms that had jumped down in front to them, while behind him, the Master Chief blew a foot wide hole through a Brute form as it raised its claw and it came apart with a moan " the shotgun had less shells than he would have liked, so he'd have to be conservative.

"Keep moving, Chief. I've got your back," Johnson reassured him. He tracked a stalker form as it positioned itself and began to mutate, and the red glow began to manifest at the front of the laser. Then the red beam lanced into the Flood form just as the needles began to emerge from it, blasting the husk off the side of the tower.

On the tower, the Master Chief and the Arbiter moved under the overhang. The combat forms could get close to them; any that tried were put down in pieces by the Chief's shotgun, whether by buckshot or the butt of the weapon. A group leapt off the upper level and landed behind them, and the Spartan instantly turned and threw a spike grenade, which caught a shielded Elite form in the chest and blew both it and another pair of combat forms apart.

The Master Chief and the Arbiter could see the ramp that led to the next level, and a few combat forms sprinted down it, needler and

spiker rounds flying past them. Johnson continued to fire from the cliff, and a tank form that was ambling towards them fell dead as the red laser beam threw it into the wall.

The Arbiter drew out his energy sword, and ran through the combat forms, swinging the blade in an arc as he went. Following the run, all but one combat form toppled to the ground in pieces, and that lone form joined them missing its head and one of its arms, courtesy of an 8-gauge shotgun shell. The Chief quickly slid shells into the weapon, and joined the Arbiter at the base of the ramp.

There were no Flood at the top of the ramp; instead they all had jumped back to the level that they'd just been on, and the Master Chief tossed a plasma grenade down that bonded to the chest of one Brute form and tore it apart. The explosion crushed the infection forms in the chest of another pair of Brute forms, and then a human form staggered as the infection form in its chest popped from a carbine round.

Sergeant Johnson radioed in again. _"Flood are crawling all over that tower; watch yourself,"_ he warned as he saw the Flood forms moving towards the Master Chief and the Arbiter.

A storm of AR fire put down an Elite form, and then the Chief and the Arbiter turned their attention to the Flood forms on their level. A few ranged forms had set themselves up, but a pair of them went down from Spartan laser blasts from Johnson before they could release any needles.

The Arbiter shot the arms off a human combat form, but that didn't stop the Flood from trying to bite him. A quick kick was sufficient to break the combat form in half, and a carbine shot popped another infection form in the chest of an Elite form.

A shielded Elite form soaked up a large amount of AR bullets and got too close to comfort, swinging its claw-like tentacles at the Master Chief's head. The Spartan ducked the blow and smashed the butt of the assault rifle into the now unshielded combat form, crushing the infection form and knocking the corpse to the floor. He emptied the assault rifle clip into another human combat form, and the combat form fell apart, releasing the infection form. The Chief quickly shoved a new clip into the rifle, but the infection form had already crawled into the chest cavity of an Elite form, and the corpse squirmed as the infection form synced with what was left of its nervous system.

The Master Chief slammed his foot onto the writhing corpse and broke it into pieces, brought out his shotgun, and blew a hole in a Brute form. He brought the barrel of the shotgun up and broke another combat form in two as he raced forward, and blew a hole through a ranged form. A pair of stalker forms loped around the corner, and one of them was caught by a plasma grenade from the Arbiter. It panicked and ran for a pair of combat forms, the grenade detonated, and the Flood dropped to the floor, slain.

They moved around the corner, out of range of Johnson's cover, and the Flood turned at headed straight for them, led by a pair of tank forms. The Arbiter drew out his sword and cut one of them in two, before being displaced by a swing from the second tank form, which dropped his shields. Blue sparks flickered over the Arbiter's armor,

and he backed away, cutting down two Brute combat forms as they lunged forward. An Elite form almost made it past his guard, the boom of the Master Chief's shotgun sounded, and the corpse came apart almost too slowly, the infection form having been literally wrenched apart by the motion.

Spiker rounds were preventing the Arbiter's shields from recharging, and he was forced back into the corridor, while the Master Chief stood his ground. A plasma grenade took care of an oncoming human form, causing it to drop its SMG, a quick shotgun blast and a blow from the barrel of the weapon blew an Elite form apart, and another shotgun blast to the face knocked the tank form back, although the lumbering behemoth wasn't dead yet.

The Spartan kicked the Elite form's carbine over to the Arbiter, the Elite grabbed it and fired five shots, four combat forms dropping to the ground with the infection forms that were controlling them punctured, and the tank form being forced back again as a radioactive pellet struck it in the head, while the Arbiter's battered shields finally recharged as the Flood assault lessened a little. The tank form mutated into a stalker form, and quickly got out of the way, moving back along the walkway.

A trio of ranged forms set themselves up along the walkway, and they began to fire their Flood needles, forcing the Master Chief and the Arbiter behind cover. The Arbiter managed to kill one of the ranged forms with carbine fire before he was forced to hide again.

There was a sizzling sound as a band of Sentinels hovered above the ranged forms and blasted them with their Sentinel beams. The Flood forms swiveled and retaliated with their needles, and despite losing one of their numbers, Sentinel after Sentinel began to fall from the sky and explode.

Of course, this meant that the ranged form didn't see the Arbiter sneak up on it and slice it in half, due to the distraction provided by the Sentinels.

The twin halves of the Flood form toppled, leaving the ramp to the top floor clear, and the Master Chief sprinted up the ramp, followed by the Arbiter.

They emerged on a roughly triangular platform, and the massive door that led to the control room sealed. Two grey cylindrical devices lay on the ground, and the Master Chief, guided by that uncanny understanding of Forerunner technology, picked them up and tossed them into the air. They unfolded into cross shaped forms. The Arbiter, meanwhile, had found an invincibility shield at the other end of the tower, and he sprinted back when he saw stalker forms scaling the tower.

Sergeant Johnson quickly joined them, taking up a position on the cliff beside the door.

Then the Flood jumped down the tower and attacked the three soldiers. All hell broke loose as the Master Chief threw grenades at knots of combat forms, the Arbiter picked the individuals off as they scaled the sides of the tower, and laser blasts pierced the pure forms and put them down from both Johnson's Spartan laser and the auto turrets that the Master Chief had set up.

"Spark?" called Johnson breathlessly as a stalker form fell in a smoking heap. "You in there? Open the damn door!"

"Of course, Reclaimer," replied 343 Guilty Spark. "Just as soon as you dispose of all proximate Flood threats. I'm afraid containment protocols do not allow me to-"

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you!" snapped Johnson impatiently.

Cortana was quite interested. "Was that the Monitor?" she asked curiously. "You didn't tell me he was here."

"Like I said â€" long story," replied the Master Chief as he put down a Brute form with a storm of AR fire.

"Well, we are finally doing what he wanted," Cortana remarked.

The Flood continued to stubbornly attack with extreme force on the top floor, combat forms swarming up the sides to flank the defense in groups of twos and threes. Many died within inches of their targets as the Master Chief and the Arbiter frantically worked to keep them at bay, and soon bodies littered the ground, and the stench of rotten flesh filled the air.

A human form with a battle rifle chose to throw itself forward rather than fire, and it quickly joined several of its fellows on the ground. The Master Chief dumped his empty shotgun, grabbed the battle rifle, and launched a quick punch to destroy the corpse as a swarm of infection forms danced across the tower. He quickly brought up the battle rifle, and took out another human form with a pair of frantic bursts.

The Spartan next tossed an antipersonnel calling card at a faraway tank form, there was a flash of blue light, and the tank form, already weakened by the Arbiter's carbine fire, toppled sideways with a groan, landing on a cluster of infection forms and popping them. The rest of the swarm was taken care of by the auto turrets.

There was a momentary lull in the combat, and the Master Chief brought out his assault rifle, while the Arbiter switched to his energy sword, igniting the blue-white plasma blades with a snarl.

The Flood began to attack again, more stalker forms emerged, accompanied by several heavily armed combat forms.

The Gravemind began to speak through the Flood forms, the multitude of voices ringing through the ears of the living. "I have beaten fleets of thousands!" it snarled angrily. "Consumed a galaxy of flesh and mind and bone!"

And with that, a human form raised a rocket launcher, and all hell broke loose - again.

The rocket blasted towards the Arbiter, and the Elite quickly activated the invincibility device. Blue energy coursed around him as the rocket was thrown away and landed in a knot of Flood, shredding them to nothingness. Mucus and blood splattered the floor, and the Arbiter leapt toward the Flood with a jump to rival their own,

brought his energy sword down, and cut the human form in two. The Arbiter picked up the fallen rocket launcher and fired at a tank form, wrenched the cover up, and reloaded.

The Master Chief had claimed a shotgun from a combat form, but he continued to harass the Flood with battle rifle bursts from a weapon that he'd claimed from the Flood after his own had been knocked away while running close-range management, and three combat forms dropped to the ground, the infection forms controlling them popped by the bullets. They quickly stood up again as infection forms entered their chest cavities, but the distraction gave the Spartan time to throw a fragmentation grenade down their way, followed by a few more bursts to slice the limbs off the bodies.

By then, the Arbiter had reloaded the launcher; the Elite targeted a combat form with a fuel rod gun, and fired, the 102mm rocket shredding the combat form in gouts of flame and detonating the fuel rods in the weapon, popping a small cluster of infection forms.

Now the Master Chief was running close range management again, and his shotgun blew large holes in the storm of oncoming combat forms, mainly infected Brutes. He blew the head (and by proximity the infection form) off of one Brute form, parried another combat form's clumsy strike with his shotgun gun and retaliated with a punch of his own that popped the infection form nestled in the Flood's chest cavity.

Beside him, one of the auto turrets exploded as the Flood fired brute shot grenades at it. Another shotgun blast took out a third Brute, a strike with the butt of the shotgun crushed in the chest of another, and a human combat form slapped "hard" at the Spartan's helmet, dropping his shields. The alarms in his suit began to whine, the Master Chief blew the combat form in half, and he fired his last shotgun shell into a Brute form's gut.

The combat form dropped to the ground, and with that the Chief, the Arbiter and Sergeant Johnson finally secured the tower, and a group of Sentinels and the automatic turret began to destroy the bodies of the combat forms, filling the air with the stench of cooking flesh. Dumping the empty shotgun, the Spartan grabbed an assault rifle from amidst a pile of human body parts as his shields recharged quickly.

Johnson tapped his earpiece. "Open up! Coast is clear," he told 343 Guilty Spark.

"Not for long," warned Cortana. "I'm tracking additional Dispersal Pods. They'll be hitting any minute!"

The Sergeant nodded as the doors opened. "Chief, Arbiter! Let's move!" he yelled, running to the left inside the massive passageways of the Control Room. The gigantic door slowly opened, and they hurried through it.

As the trio moved inside the Control Room, the Master Chief's vision went green, and the voice of the Gravemind boomed through his ears.

"Do I take life or give it? Who is victim, and who is foe?" asked the Flood.

Cortana gasped. "It's trying to rebuild itself on this ring!" she explained in shock.

Johnson's face tightened. "Hurry! Control Room's close!" he called as he sprinted around a right turn. The Arbiter overtook them all, taking a left turn in to stand in front of another door, yet somehow it was different from all the others.

The Master Chief and Johnson reached the spot where the Arbiter was standing, and the doors opened.

Then they heard horrible shrieks as they heard the Flood approaching, but the second "to-last pair of doors closed, and sealed them out. The Arbiter walked warily into the corridor, carbine at the ready in case the door opened again.

"Yank me, Chief," ordered Cortana as the Spartan looked around the Control Room, identical to that on the first Halo, with that same narrow, rail-less bridge over a yawning span. Not for the first time, he wondered if it had been designed that way as if to remind those present of the danger and power of the Installation.

The Chief focused, and quickly removed Cortana's data chip from his helmet with a practiced yank, examining it.

Sergeant Johnson looked at the Spartan. "I'm not gonna lose her too," he said with conviction.

The Chief tossed the data chip to Johnson, who caught it neatly. Hefting his Spartan laser, Johnson headed for the control panel, while the Chief covered the door with his assault rifle, and the Arbiter with his carbine.

A whimsical, mechanical humming echoed from above as 343 Guilty Spark drifted down from the top of the control room and accompanied him.

"Oh, hello! Wonderful news - the Installation is almost complete!"_ said Spark happily.

"Terrific," replied Johnson, an uninterested look on his grim face.

"Yes... isn't it?"_ agreed Spark. There was an awkward silence for a few seconds._ "I have begun my simulations. No promises, but initial results indicate that this facility should be ready to fire...in just a few more days!" _he said happily as they arrived at the console, with red sections on the incomplete holographic ring indicating the unfinished sections.

"We don't have a few more days!" snapped Johnson impatiently. He scanned the console, looking for the socket that would allow Cortana to activate the Installation.

Spark protested in shock and alarm. _"Bu-bu-but a premature firing will __destroy__ the Ark!" _he cried.

Johnson snorted."Deal with it," he said dismissively, finding the socket and beginning to insert the chip.

"...will destroy this Installation," finished Spark quietly.

The next event would be repeated in the Master Chief's nightmares forever, as he would turn to the console just in time to see 343 Guilty Spark's "eye" suddenly turn red and blast Johnson with his powerful energy beam.

Johnson howled in pain as the beam pierced his chestplate and he pitched forward and fell to the ground, armor smoking.

_"Unacceptable! _Unacceptable! _Absolutely unacceptable!"_ shrieked the Monitor, advancing on the Chief and the Arbiter.

The Chief sprinted forward, rushing to Johnson's aid. 343 Guilty Spark leveled his eye and blasted the Chief, flinging the Spartan backwards from the force of the blast and onto the floor. His energy shields dropped, having absorbed the impact, and they attempted to recharge. The Chief kept his eyes on the shield indicator, silently begging the blue bar to fill up quickly.

The Monitor was in hysterics. _"Protocol dictates action! I see now that helping you was _wrong!_"_ he cried.

The Arbiter, hearing the commotion, moved forward towards the Oracle with his carbine ready to fire, and 343 Guilty Spark turned on him as well, unleashing his beam on him and knocking him out of the Control Room with a single hit. At the Monitor's unspoken command, the doors closed, sealing the Arbiter out of the room " though fortunately, not out with the Flood.

The Master Chief began to rise and Spark blasted the Chief again as he tried to get back up. With no shields protecting him this time, his armor started to smoke.

Spark's eye turned blue again. _"You are the child of my makers. Inheritor of all they left behind,"_ he stated. He turned his body towards the Master Chief and declared words that would shake the Spartan's blood. _"You _are_ Forerunner! But this ring..."_ he said, and his eye turned red in an incredibly sinister manner, _"___... is _mine_"_ _

Refusing to let the Monitor beat him, the Spartan rose to his feet, and his shields recharged.

"I take no pleasure in doing what must be done," warned Spark.

The Chief unlimbered and fired his battle rifle. Assault rifle bullets had had no effect on the Monitor back on the first Halo, but maybe bursts of fire might succeed.

His hopes hadn't been high, and dropped to an all-time low as he saw the bullets bounce off the Monitor, and Spark countered with his powerful laser blasts and a repulsion field that forced the Chief backwards. The force knocked his battle rifle out of his hands and sent it spiraling off the edge of the walkway, and his shields dropped again. He jumped over the beam of energy to avoid being injured by it again, as it passed by so close that he could smell ozone.

"You do not deserve this ring!" cried Spark, cornering the Master Chief. "I have kept it safe. It belongs to me!"

Then out of the corner of his eye, and unnoticed by 343 Guilty Spark, the Chief saw Sergeant Johnson manage to sit halfway up and shoulder the Spartan laser. "Not for long!" roared the Sergeant, and a red glow began to manifest at the weapons front.

The Spartan laser's laser beam had a muzzle velocity of 299,792,458 meters per second. Spark didn't have a chance of dodging it. Sergeant Johnson blasted 343 Guilty Spark with the Spartan laser.

Caught off-guard, Spark was blasted away from the Chief, falling to the ground and becoming inert.

The Master Chief ignored the fallen Monitor, and he ran desperately towards Johnson, who nodded, and held up the laser. "Kick his ass," he groaned, as he passed out.

The Spartan caught his Spartan laser before it could hit the ground, and lifted the weapon on his right shoulder, turning to face 343 Guilty Spark as he rose from the floor, flying at a slightly tilted angle, his metal body visibly damaged.

"You - you cracked my casing!" cried the Monitor in shock. "My eye! Do you mean to blind me!?"

The Master Chief responded by lining up Spark in the sights of the laser, and he depressed the trigger.

Spark panicked when he saw the red glow emerge from the butt of the weapon "Stop now, before one of us gets hurt!" he ordered.

The Master Chief fired the laser instead. The red beam threw Spark backwards, and Spark began to fly at a more tilted angle, leaking blue plasma from his sides and sparking with energy.

Spark tried to speak, but his voice broke, then readjusted itself as he said, "-destroy your inheritance! Accept your legacy! Think of you-ou-ou-our forefathers!"

There was nothing behind the Master Chief's visor that showed any mercy as the red glow built up again, and the red beam lanced forth and slammed into the Monitor, blasting him over the middle of the room, under the hologram of Halo.

Spark's casing distorted, with pieces of him sheared off completely. More plasma leaked from his sides and the sparks began to erupt from his casing more ferociously. The right side of his 'eye' began to shudder, and it broke off.

Spark began to make a garbled humming sound, and said in a high crackling voice, "M-m-my pr-precious!"

Once again, the Master Chief targeted Spark in the blue circle on his visor, and pressed the trigger. The red glow built up, and Spark moving towards the Spartan slowly, with a deteriorating, breaking voice, a last effort to dissuade the Spartan from firing, said, "I a-a-a-am the Monitor of Installation Z-Zero F-Four!"

Eat this, thought the Master Chief. The Spartan laser discharged again, the final shot left in the battery, and scorched the Monitor, blasting him over the holographic console of Halo's Control Room.

Spark stopped short and began to tremble. His voice rose as he started to glow, the final Spartan laser blast had critically damaged his systems, and with all the strain being placed on them, they took the easiest way out. The Monitor screamed, _"__Oh myyyyyyyyyyy-aaahh!__",_ a scream that trailed off into pure agony and 343 Guilty Spark exploded, the red fading into blue as he was destroyed.

The Master Chief tossed the Spartan laser aside, walked forward, and bent over Sergeant Johnson, who was still alive â€" but barely.

"I'm getting you out of here," said the Spartan, rolling the Sergeant Major over, but he found it hard to believe the words.

Johnson had noticed, and he shook his head. "No you're... no you're not," he said sadly.

Johnson grabbed the Chief's hand with Cortana's chip in his. "Don't - don't let her go," he said softly. "Don't... _ever_ let her go." He coughed hoarsely, and spoke for the final time, "Send me out... with a bang."

With that, Sergeant Major Avery Junior Johnson slowly succumbed to his wounds, closing his eyes and falling limp.

The Master Chief took Cortana's data chip from him and let go of his hand. He stood up, walked forward, and he wordlessly released Cortana into Halo's core, gripping the data chip tightly.

Cortana transmitted herself into the holographic console, her avatar appearing standing on the metal part of the projector. The AI looked sadly at Johnson's body. "Chief... I'm so sorry," she whispered, shaking her head.

The Master Chief didn't say anything. He shook the chip with his hand but quickly stopped.

Cortana bowed her head; eyes closed, and made a gesture, activating Halo with a heavy click. She uploaded herself back into her chip, reaching out towards it.

The Chief placed her chip in the back of his helmet, and then turned around.

Brilliant beams of light erupted from the Core, and the whole Control Room started to shake and fall apart, rather than rearranging itself into the three platforms seen when the Delta Halo had been activated, struts on the side began to fall off, and slammed into the sides of the Control Room with large crashes.

Johnson's body slid off the platform as it tilted to one side and began to fall. The Master Chief ran for the door, which had opened again, the Arbiter waiting for the Spartan.

This is the way the world ends, thought the Master Chief grimly as he reached the Arbiter.

The Elite bowed his head in sorrow, and nodded. "I am sorry, Spartan. But come," he said in his low voice.

Pieces of the walls around them suddenly exploded; and the Master Chief and the Arbiter snapped back to reality to run for the doorway leading outside; running straight into a small group of Flood along the way " they had broken through the doors at last, but too late" far too late.

The Spartan unlimbered his assault rifle, and he shredded the vast swarm of infection forms with a single clip, leaving the Elite combat forms to fall to the Arbiter's carbine. He mechanically loaded another clip, and he grabbed a plasma rifle even as the Arbiter cast his depleted carbine aside to grab two of his own.

The Master Chief and the Arbiter made it back outside, but the automatic turret had turned on them, and laser blasts began to slice across their shields. The Chief threw a grenade as they dived behind cover, and heard a satisfying explosion of metal.

They looked to the right, and saw a piece of collapsed ice forming a slope upwards to the cliff on the right of the door, where Sergeant Johnson had been.

"Even in death, your Sergeant guides us all," remarked the Arbiter.

Cortana gasped. "The _Dawn... of course - the frigate!" she cried. "We still have a chance!"

Two Sentinels were hovering on the cliff face, blasting a group of human combat forms with their beams. The Arbiter opened fire on the Flood, and they soon fell in pieces under the pressure of the fire.

With that done, the Spartan turned to the Sentinels, and fired on them as well, even as they turned on the pair. The Arbiter was almost caught off-guard, but blasted one with his plasma rifles until it exploded, the other fell under the Chief's AR fire.

"I thought that might happen," commented the Chief. "They did the same thing on the first Halo."

"Loyal to the Oracle to the end," snarled the Arbiter. "Let us hurry!" he said as the Spartan scooped up another plasma rifle.

Cortana agreed. "Find the doorway in the cliffs, Chief," she said. "The _Dawn_ is on the other side."

The Chief and the Arbiter headed along the cliff, encountering more battling Flood and Sentinels, who had followed 343 Guilty Spark's lead and turned against them too. The Flood had the numbers advantage, destroying the Sentinels and leaving the Master Chief and the Arbiter to clean up.

The Arbiter ignited his energy blade, and he sprinted forward,

slashing his way through the combat forms and clearing the path.

He could see the doorway in the cliffs, and the Spartan sprinted forward towards the battle around them between three Brute forms and a Sentinel. One was put down by the energy beam, and the rest by the Arbiter. The Chief destroyed the Sentinel with a storm of plasma bolts, and the circular shields of the machine flared as it lost power, fell, and exploded.

They made it inside, and found themselves in the middle of a battle, between the Flood and a trio of Sentinels. The Master Chief threw his last frag grenade at the Flood, and the ensuing explosion damaged a Sentinel's shields and killed a pair of Elite combat forms. He put down the Sentinels, leaving the Flood to the Arbiter.

As they reached the passage out of the room, blasting another pair of Elite combat forms into fetid shreds, the voice of the Gravemind spoke to them. "Resignation is my virtue. Like water I ebb and flow. Defeat is simply the addition of time to a sentence I never deserved... but you imposed." _

The Spartan rounded the corner, and threw himself backwards, riddling the pair of carrier forms that stood in the hallway with bullets. One of them exploded, knocking the other to the ground, and the second explosion popped the infection forms from the first. There were still plenty of the little pods though, and they danced towards the Spartan and the Elite, who mechanically popped the pods in groups before the rest of the carrier forms that were waddling down the hall could get there.

The Arbiter swiftly drew a plasma grenade, primed it, and threw it straight and true at the lead carrier form. The grenade detonated, and the carrier form exploded into a mass of flesh and mucus, the infection forms that were seething inside released, and the carrier form behind them exploded and released another swarm of infection forms.

As the Master Chief emptied his clip into the infection forms and swiftly reloaded, Cortana warned, "Don't let this ring be the end of us, Chief."

The Arbiter roared as he blasted the Flood with his plasma rifles, the storm of bolts shredding them. The Chief was firing again now, and the last few pods popped in clouds of spores.

They took a left down a thin passage, and sprinted along it, destroyed another group of infection forms, making it back outside where a single Warthog was sitting.

"There! Johnson's Warthog," cried Cortana.

The Arbiter took the turret, hoisting himself into the cramped space, while the Master Chief hoisted himself into the driver's seat and took the wheel, activating the vehicle and pressing his foot to the accelerator as soon as he could without stalling the LRV.

"Come on, Spartan - go, go, go!" said Cortana urgently.

The Spartan did so, flooring the accelerator, and the Warthog shot forward with a jolt. He didn't have a timer on his visor like when

he'd escaped from the Pillar of Autumn, but he had a feeling that Halo would provide its own timer, while Cortana monitored Halo's charging sequence. The Chief took a left turn, passing an open area, covered in large square shaped panels emblazoned with an orange plus. A massive explosion erupted alongside them as they drove. They were nowhere near enough for the explosion to hit them, but the Chief was starting to worry, before putting the worry out of his mind. That worry started to nag when he turned a corner, and saw a field of those same platforms ahead.

"Drive, Chief. Head for the frigate," Cortana said coolly.

A group of Sentinels drifted towards them, firing their Sentinel beams. The Master Chief was about to take evasive action when the Arbiter figured out how to operate the Warthog's turret, and Vulcan rounds began thudding through the air. Sentinels began to sizzle and explode, the destroyed husks falling out of the air and landing on the platforms.

A panel exploded on the left of the Warthog, and then another, a few squares in front of him.

The Master Chief braked, and the Warthog slid to the right, and down a ramp.

"Come on! Faster!" urged Cortana.

The Chief and the Arbiter had reached a massive open structure, and the Spartan stamped on the brake, stopping the Warthog short before it could crash into the wall. He turned the wheel to the right, steering the LRV around the circular structure in the middle.

Even here wasn't safe from the Flood, the ground was seething with infection forms, and there were even a few carrier forms waddling around. The Spartan avoided them; a single carrier form explosion would tip the Warthog over, leaving them at the mercy of the Flood. Any Flood forms that got close were shredded by turret fire from the Arbiter.

"The Dawn is close," Cortana reported as they drove back onto panels again, the Master was steering the 'Hog carefully for a large hallway up ahead. "We can make it!" she said, conviction in her voice. "As long as the ground doesn't fall underneath us..."

Right after she'd said that, there was a large explosion as one of the panels next to the Warthog was thrown into the air. The Arbiter roared in anger as he gripped the turret for dear life, and the Master Chief spared a moment to whack his helmet with his free hand.

"What?" asked Cortana.

The Warthog drifted around a corner, zoomed up a short rise, a panel exploded underneath it, causing it to land precariously, and they entered inside the interior of a large hallway with ramps, where the Sentinels were managing a cluster of combat forms, many armed with heavy ordnance. The Chief took the central walkway, deciding that the other side ramps were too risky, despite the congregation of enemies.

"The charging sequence... it's too much for the ring to take!" said Cortana in shock.

The Master Chief responded by stepping on the accelerator, leaving any combat forms that paid attention to them to be either splattered by the Warthog's tires, or put down by Vulcan fire from the Arbiter. A few Sentinel beams struck the Arbiter's armor, but the energy drains were small, and the Warthog was out of harm's way quickly. The Sentinels distraction simply left them open to fire from the Flood, however, and the machines began to topple to the ground one after the other.

They sped up another rise, landed on the platforms again, and platforms left and right exploded beside them.

Cortana cried out in shock, "Halo is ripping itself apart!"

The Warthog came upon a large open stretch, more Flood, this time including some combat forms, were crawling all over the structure. The Master Chief steered the Warthog left this time, not bothering to brake, running down a combat form that had dived in front of the LRV by accident.

The Spartan weaved between the carrier forms, and soon the end of the structure was in sight, he gunned the 'Hog's engine and the Warthog caved in the chest of a combat form, surged into the air, and landed squarely on the metal panels.

"Hurry Chief! Don't stop!" cried Cortana.

"I know, I know," replied the Spartan coolly. He didn't bother getting agitated over their predicament, he was certainly focused in getting out of there as fast as possible, but he wasn't going to let that affect his driving.

The Warthog drove up a bumpy "hill" of panels, passing beside a pillar "the Spartan prayed that the panels beside them wouldn't explode" and he prayers were answered, panels far away and behind them did.

Cortana was tracking Halo's charging sequence as they drove. "Charging sequence at 30%..." she said as more panels erupted around them. Behind them, the structure toppled into the abyss below, the Warthog was staying steadily ahead of the panels as they fell behind them.

The Master Chief turned right, just avoiding a nasty fall, and more Sentinels swooped in, but the Arbiter quickly finished the machines off as the Warthog was steered up a ramp, over a gap, and hard into the panels, then over a larger gap, dropping onto one more open structure, this time a few Flood pure forms awaited them in addition to the carrier and infection forms.

The Spartan dodged a pair of carrier forms and a few swarms of infection forms as the Warthog approached the pure forms, with more infection form swarms around them. There was no way that the Master Chief was going to risk tangling with the tank forms, but there was little choice but to run into the ranged forms that had set themselves up between the Warthog and they went down easily, splattering sticky green gore over the windscreen. Without missing a

beat, the Spartan activated the water sprayer in the hood of the Warthog, cleaning the gore from the windscreen. But then he cursed inwardly as he saw a tank form right in front of him, but the Flood form shielded itself, and was battered aside by the Warthog easily.

"50%, Chief!" warned Cortana as the 'Hog leapt off the structure, its tires landed on panels, and it shot forward past a large pillar.

A panel exploded right in front of them, and the Chief wrenched the steering wheel sideways, thinking that it would be in vain as the rear wheels of the Warthog lost their grip and hung over empty space, but the 'Hog held its grip, and drove up a ramp into another hallway with ramps, where a larger battle between Sentinels and the Flood raged on. There was even more heavy ordnance being deployed by the Flood, and even more fuel rods filled the air, destroyed Sentinels were falling left and right, but the fight wasn't one sided, the Sentinels were able to evade individual shots with relative ease, and their combined laser fire put down several combat forms.

The Spartan wisely avoided the fight, making his way to the left ramps, driving down a solid offshoot, passing by the fight, and narrowly speeding under a falling strut. He passed a second firefight between the Sentinels and the Flood, and here the Sentinels were more numerous, but the Flood fought back furiously, destroying machine after machine.

"70%!" Cortana reported in, and the Chief drove the 'Hog up a ramp, there was a yawning sensation in both his and the Arbiter's stomachs as they soared over a short gap, and then the Warthog landed tires down.

They'd made it out of the hallway battle, to an area of panels where the Master Chief could see the frigate could see from a distance. A large pillar lost its grip, and fell towards the panels, scything through the group that led to the frigate.

Cortana had already mapped out the route, and painted a marker on the Master Chief's HUD.

"80% charged!" yelled Cortana as the Warthog soared into the air and landed hard.

The Spartan floored the accelerator again, and they headed for the final bend, encountering more Sentinels. The Sentinels were too slow to catch up with them, a few fell to Vulcan fire from the Arbiter as another few panels exploded beside them.

What appeared to be Halo's Cartographer island, unfinished was looming ahead of them, and the Spartan hoped that there would be panels leading around it to the frigate. They sped up the hill, the Arbiter firing on more Sentinels, dropping two of the machines before the Warthog left them behind. A panel exploded in front of them again, but the shock slowed the Warthog enough for the brakes to do the rest, the Spartan quickly reversing and heading down hill, around the "island."

A group of Elite Flood combat forms charged across the panels towards them, only to fall as another pillar destroyed the row of panels that they stood on. The light of the foundries was tinting everything red

as they shot over a short rise, landed heavily, and continued on.

"90% - firing sequence initiated!" cried Cortana desperately as they rounded the corner past what looked like the Cartographer island, a series of panels above them teetering dangerously. They continued around the corner, a last flock of Sentinels flying in as the Arbiter took them out, one by one. The Chief and the Arbiter could see the back of the frigate "they had made it to the final straight stretch to the Forward Unto Dawn, but there was another explosion as a panel erupted into shards beside them, knocking their shields slightly and forcing them to a halt, wasting precious seconds. They started moving again, with the last obstacle between them and the Dawn being the seventy meter gap of thin air between the open cargo bay and the edge of the structure.

"Gun it, Chief! Jump! Floor it! Right into the hangar!" cried Cortana desperately, even as the Master Chief did so. He floored the accelerator, and the Warthog shot forwards down the hill, ran sturdily up the final ramp, and launched itself into the air as the panels erupted beneath them just as they got out of the blast range.

The Warthog made the jump, but it didn't land well, tumbling and rolling as it crashed into the frigate's hangar.

The Master Chief and the Arbiter were thrown out of the LRV, and took a moment to recover, and then the Dawn shifted. A Scorpion Main Battle Tank began sliding towards the Arbiter, who turned and fled, taking cover behind a pile of crates. The tank plowed into it.

The Chief leapt over the Warthog and hesitated, seeing the Arbiter digging himself out of the crates. The Chief nodded at him, and Arbiter paused in surprise before nodding back. The Arbiter turned and rushed to the bridge while the Chief ran to the hangar panel and plugged Cortana's data chip into it to take control of the frigate.

Cortana's avatar appeared from a holotank next to the panel. "Hang on!" she warned the Spartan.

Cortana quickly scrolled through the Dawn's systems, found the engine controls and ignited the thrusters at full burn, launching the Dawn at full speed away from Halo.

The Master Chief grabbed onto the terminal, hanging on for dear life as the Dawn began to shudder as it passed through Halo's atmosphere. As the Chief tried to stay anchored, the Warthog lost its grip on the floor out, striking the Spartan in the shoulder on its way through the open hanger doors and out into empty space.

The Chief was wrenched off the panel, and then slid down the floor towards the doors, with the self-destructing Halo looming beneath the Dawn. Just as with Delta Halo, energy was collecting in the center of the ring from all around the ring, but rather than the pure white it had been then, it was tinted an angry pink due to the foundry below and the unstable nature of the ring.

The Chief raised his right arm, and putting every ounce of strength from the MJOLNIR Mk VI, he punched his fist hard into the floor to

get a grip, halting his progress with a painful jolt near the back end of the hangar.

Up on the holotank, Cortana reached out her arm towards him, every fiber of her artificial being wrenching in fear of losing him. "_Chief!_" she cried in horror.

The Spartan looked up to see that the Scorpion had also lost its traction, and the MBT flew out towards the Chief. He ducked his head just in time as it fell over him, the treads narrowly missing the Chief but smashing the floor behind him before tumbling out of the hangar bay doors and falling back towards Halo.

With that danger avoided, the Chief began to climb back up to Cortana, who lowered her arm in relief as the Spartan gripped the corrugated floor. The Master Chief finally made it back to the holotank, and both he and Cortana straightened up, the energy beginning to reach its peak...

Meanwhile, the Arbiter had made his way to the bridge and the Elite sat down at the unfamiliar controls. Operating instructions, sent by Cortana suddenly appeared on a screen beside him, and the Arbiter grimly began to move the ship manually towards the Portal.

Cortana saw something blink across her vision as the Arbiter took control, the Master Chief removing her data chip from the holotank.

The Chief sat down and braced himself behind the panel, plugging Cortana back into his helmet.

"If we don't make it..." said Cortana hesitantly.

"We'll make it," said the Master Chief in that same determined voice that he'd used when he flew the Banshee into the _Pillar of Autumn_ on the original Halo.

Cortana paused before replying in a soft voice, "It's been an honor serving with you, John."

The Chief finally rested his head back, exhausted.

Behind them, Halo finally built up its energy, but the ringworld was too incomplete to control the pulse weapon. Halo's systems overloaded, and the ring suddenly exploded with a cavernous, yet soundless explosion, engulfing the hangar in a binding white light.

The Master Chief's vision went blank.

**Holy mother of our lord. **

I had to do this so very many times to get the Warthog run on film/in my head, but hell, it was worth it. By the way, that bit with the tires over the edge. Happened to me, dear god. I don't like the Warthog run, it takes it out of me.

After this we'll have the epilogue, where I'll thank everyone that's reviewed properly (so if you want a personal thank you, write down a different name **_other**_** than Guest if possible if you

are a guest), so please review, everyone who's favourited and following! I know that you're out there!**

â€|**Please? **

15. Epilogue

Halo: The Installation

And of course, one final part, one extremely crucial part. Thank you everyone who has reviewed, I really hope that I've catered to your wants. If not, well, at the very least, I can say that I actually **_finished**_**a Halo 3 novelization. A rare feat, is it not?**

Eh-heh-heh...I'm gonna be honest, I delayed this deliberately. Don't hate me! I've also been fixing all the grammar errors, and adding in those grey line breaks.

So, let's begin the thank yous, to reviewers and other things.

ghostleon: Thanks again for the confidence and praise, mate. Glad that you've enjoyed this.

slik: Here we are, and yeah, it certainly has been a wild ride. Especially the Warthog run â€" ahhhh! I'm okay.

Sileq: Hope I put in enough of the Arbiter for you, and that I was able to cater to your wants.

Legionary Prime: As one of my earliest reviewers, I can only give my deepest thanks.

Ny'kle: Thanks. Sorry about a few of the waits.

SpiritOfSherwood: (Still haven't got the Fog Skull). You and me both, mate.

ReverseSceptile: You didn't think that I was going to forget my first reviewer, did you?

Alpha B. A. 7: Oh, thank you! I'm glad that I could provide the experience. I feel your pain (well, kinda, I don't have Xbox LIVE so I miss out on a lot of Halo stuff.) Lucky you, I still haven't played Halo 2's campaign. Like I said, I might keep up the work, it depends how much wants me to do a Reach or 4 novelization, and on how long I take a break from this. I'll probably wait for the last Kilo-Five book to come out before I'd even think of starting on 4, for example.

**Geronimo: Course I remember you. Actually, now that you've brought them up, doing the squad-based fights is tugging at my interests. I put myself down and handicap myself all the time; it's just the kind of person I am. I probably exaggerate it a fair bit, but while you're here, check out Peptuck's "Halo: The Arbiter," if you haven't, it hasn't been touched on for ages, but it's damn good, and Peptuck is much more military-minded than I am, so a lot of the tactics make

more sense, which puts a bit of pressure on me. I was also worried about making the same mistakes that Dietz did for Halo: The Flood, which was pretty good, but skimmed over the combat a wee bit, and the Master Chief is quite different. Hell, I'd probably base Noble Six on that iteration. But thank you for your praise, I really appreciated it!**

All the guests, thank you for taking your time to leave a review.

Youngbountygirl: Thanks for telling me how to do those line things.

**Halo Nation: Thanks for providing the transcripts and walkthroughs that I referred to/reworded for this novelization. Well, not that you knew that I was doing this, but still, thank you! **

**My best friend: Thank you, so, so much for getting this game for me. **

Bungie: Of course, the makers of such a great game, and may we all wish you well in your quest for world domination, especially as Destiny looks so badass!

A small group of Marines had gathered on a hillside near the now-shutdown Portal to the Ark. Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood looked at the horizon, before he turned to the Marines, removed his hat, and began his speech.

"For us, the storm has passed. The war is over. But let us never forget those who journeyed into the howling dark and did not return. For their decision required courage beyond measure..."

As Hood spoke, he remembered the final burst of energy as the front half of the Forward Unto Dawn entered the Earth's atmosphere, and crashed into the Indian Ocean.

"...sacrifice, and unshakable conviction that their fight, our fight, was elsewhere."

An engineering crew had cut into the Dawn's hull with torches. They'd peeled back the metal and then they'd all stepped back in awe as a massive bronze-armored Elite emerged from the wreckage.

He looked down to see the Arbiter standing solemnly with the Marines at the memorial, head slightly bowed. Hood regarded the Elite as he continued his speech.

"As we start to rebuild, this hillside will remain barren, a memorial to heroes fallen. They ennobled all of us, and they shall not be forgotten."

Admiral Hood put his hat back on, and saluted to his men.

Master Sergeant Marcus Pete Stacker saluted back, and he turned to the other Marines present. "Present arms!" he ordered.

Seven Marines raised their battle rifles and each Marine fired a single burst of three shots, three times: a 3-volley salute. The bullets fell over the Ark Portal, now closed, deactivated and silent,

with Mt. Kilimanjaro standing out against the evening sky.

Later, Hood and the Arbiter stood alone at the Memorial, a fragment of a Pelican wing, decorated with pictures of the fallen, including Lieutenant Commander Miranda Keyes and Sergeant Major Avery Johnson.

"I remember how this war started," Hood said, reminiscing of days past. "What your kind did to mine. I can't forgive you. But..." and now, Hood held out his hand to the Elite. "You have my thanks," he said sincerely. "For standing by him to the end."

The Arbiter almost hesitated, reached out, and he slowly shook Admiral Hood's hand. After letting go, Hood's eyes were drawn to one part of the memorial in particular.

"Hard to believe he's dead," was all that Hood could manage as he gazed at the memorial.

The Arbiter looked away from the memorial, towards the _Shadow of Intent_, which was hovering silently in the sky.

"Were it so easy."

* * *

><p>The Arbiter left the memorial, slowly walking down the grassy hill. His Separatist Phantom slowly lifted off, and the craft headed back to the Shadow of Intent, which was hovering in about the same position the Portal to the Ark once was.

Disembarking the Phantom, the Arbiter saw all the Elites present in the hangar stop and turn to face him. The Arbiter looked around the hangar, and began to walk towards the door that would lead to the bridge.

There was a flourish of movement as N'tho 'Sraom, followed by a squad of SpecOps Elites, raised his arm in a salute. Usze 'Taham and a band of Elite Ascetics followed suit, as did every other Elite present, all as the Arbiter walked past them.

Stopping at the door, the Arbiter nodded, and saluted back to the Elites, before entering a grav-lift that would take him to the bridge.

Emerging from the grav-lift, the Arbiter met with Shipmaster Rtas 'Vadum on the bridge, who was looking at a holographic image of the Earth.

"Things look different," remarked the Shipmaster, acknowledging the Arbiter's presence with a slight nod. "Without the Prophets' lies clouding my vision." The white-armored Elite turned to the Arbiter. "I would like to see our own world - to know that it is safe," admitted 'Vadum.

The Arbiter, following a human trait of comfort, placed his left hand on 'Vadum's shoulder. "Fear not," he reassured his former commander. "For we have made it so." The Arbiter clenched his other fist to his chest, over the heart, and then walked towards the gravity throne.

As the Arbiter walked toward the command chair, 'Vadum clenched his right fist to his chest likewise. "By your word, Arbiter," he replied solemnly.

Thel 'Vadam, the Arbiter, took his seat on the command chair, the one normally used by Rtas 'Vadum.

"Take us home," he said to the bridge crew, and they nodded back respectfully.

As the _Shadow of Intent_ powered up and left the Earth, to rejoin the remains of the Covenant Separatist fleet in space, the Arbiter thought back to the memorial.

Underneath the print "UNSCDF March 3, 2553", he had carved the English number "117" into the metal of the wing, and the rank of Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy had been taped to the upper right of it as a tribute.

* * *

><p>"Chief? Can you hear me?"<p>

The Master Chief, very much alive, awoke floating in zero gravity in a debris-filled hallway on board the _Dawn_ to the sound of Cortana's voice.

Cortana sighed in relief as the Spartan began to move. "I thought I'd lost you, too," she admitted.

The Master Chief looked at a gaping hole in the hallway. He drifted to a floating MA5D assault rifle, and holstered it, then began to drift to the end of the hallway. "What happened?" he asked curiously.

"I'm not sure," replied Cortana. "When Halo fired, it shook itself to pieces. Did a number on the Ark. The Portal couldn't sustain itself. We made it through just as it collapsed."

The Chief reached the end of the hallway, which opened up into empty space.

The _Forward Unto Dawn_ had been sheared in half, it was now floating in a cloud of its own debris, still red-hot from the sudden Slipspace slowdown.

"Well... some of us made it," said Cortana sadly as the _Dawn's_ remaining half continued to drift aimlessly in unknown space.

The Master Chief turned around and began to drift further inside the ship. He eventually found a working row of cryotubes, complete with a holotank to plug Cortana's data chip into.

"But you did it," Cortana said. "Truth and the Covenant, the Flood..."

The Chief plugged Cortana's data chip into the holotank and her avatar appeared standing on the pedestal.

"It's finished," she said.

The Master Chief turned off the flashlight on his helmet. "It's finished," he agreed. He placed his assault rifle in one of the racks on the wall.

"I'll drop a beacon," offered Cortana. "But it'll be a while before anyone finds us."

The Chief nodded, barely hearing her as he climbed into one of the cryotubes.

"Years, even," pointed out Cortana desperately as the cryotube door began to close. "I'll miss you," she said sadly.

It seemed to take an eternity for the Spartan to reply, in that moment, he was more tired than he'd ever been before, and he welcomed the embrace of cryosleep. "Wake me," he said to Cortana as the door closed over his visor. "When you need me."

Cortana looked up in surprise, smiled, and nodded. The cryotube closed and sealed, freezing the Master Chief in preparation for when he would next be needed.

Cortana stood on her pedestal silently, in such close proximity to the Spartan, but more alone than she had been in her entire lifespan, and she turned her face away from the cryotube, unable to bear the sight of the still form that lay inside as she began turning off all the unnecessary systems of the frigate.

* * *

><p>Four years, seven months, and ten days after Halo Event.

The back half of the Forward Unto Dawn slowly drifted towards a silvery-grey planet.

The planet eclipsed its star at first, but the star slowly emerged from behind the planet, casting light upon its silvery metal surface momentarily before blinding the view from the frigate completely.

End
file.